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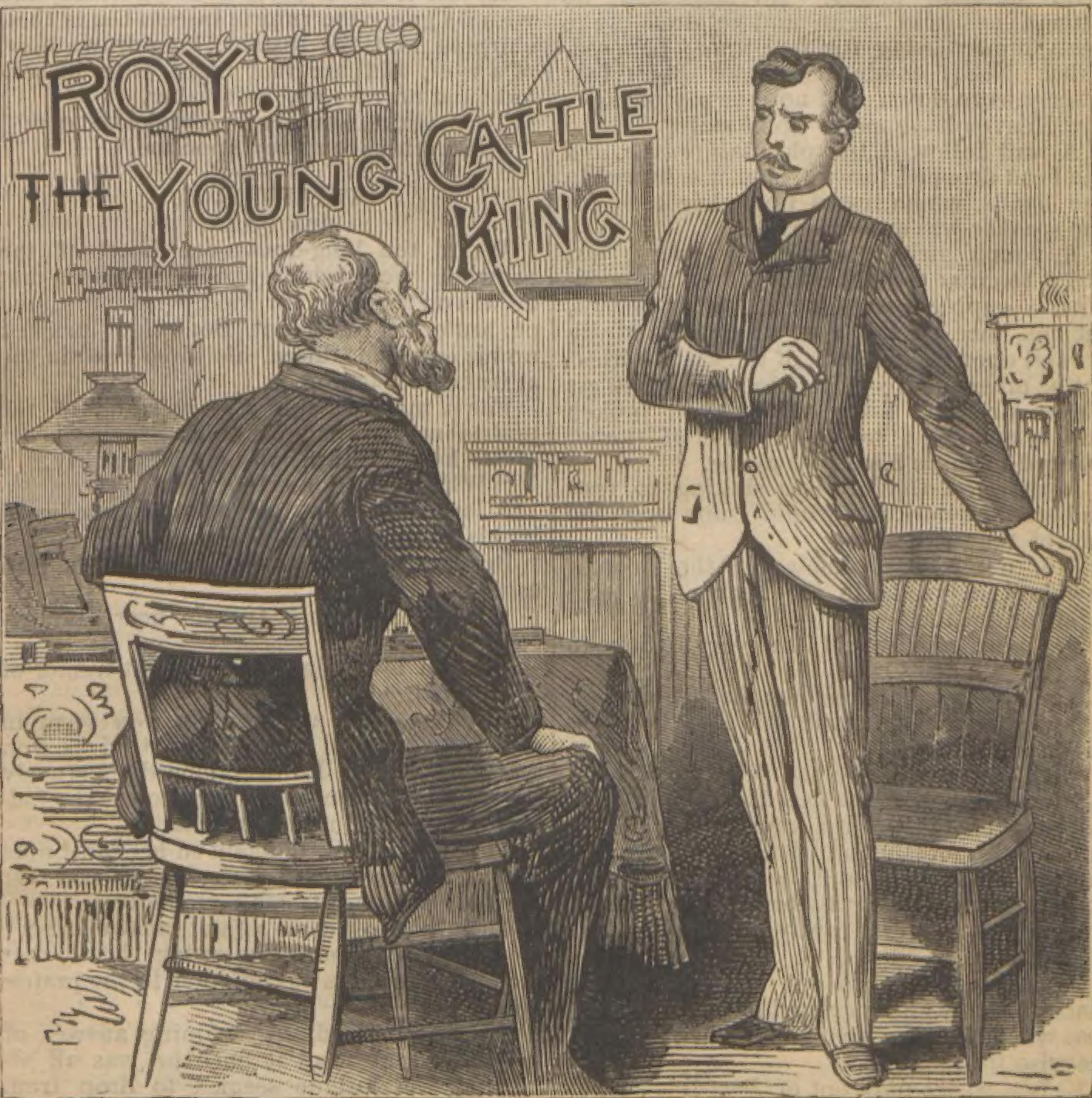
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"BY HEAVEN! HE SHALL NOT MARRY HER THEN."

Roy, the Young Cattle King;

OR,

THE TEXAN SPORT UNMASKED.

A Sequel to "Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins,
and a Romance of the Wild West."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "THE SEA DEVIL," "DICK DEAD-EYE," "THE BOY DUELIST," "LITTLE GRIT," "GOLD PLUME," ETC.

CHAPTER I. LOST.

"Oh, God, have mercy! I am lost on these wild, desolate plains! No help near, no human being in sight; and yet dreading to see a human being for fear it may be a red-skin. Night coming on, poor Bonnyfoot utterly worn down, and not one ray of hope.

"Heaven have mercy upon me!"

A wail followed the pleading prayer, and the head drooped forward and was buried in the hands, which rested upon her knee, for the speaker was on horseback.

A young girl of surpassing beauty, just about to cross the threshold of womanhood, with a supple form, graceful and elegant, sat on her tired horse, gazing wistfully around upon the solitude of the vast prairies.

For miles in every direction the boundless plains stretched away, the horizon broken only at one point, where a growth of timber marked a prairie island, or motte.

In the west the sun was sinking to rest, and ere long darkness would come upon the face of the earth.

No, not total darkness, for the moon, a few days old, rode in the heavens to give light for a while.

Yet what good would its silvery light be to her?

None, as all day long she had ridden on and on, striving in vain to find her way back to her home.

With the sunrise she had left her father's ranch, mounted on the fleet Bonnyfoot, for a gallop over the prairie, and, intoxicated by the fresh air of the prairies, the balmy perfume of the flowers, and the sight of a deer bounding from the grass before her, she had given chase, and far away had the animal led her.

Warned never to go out of sight of the ranch, bitterly she regretted her thoughtlessness when she saw that she had disobeyed the wise injunction.

A few weeks only out of boarding-school in the East, from whence her father had come to find a home in Texas, she had not

become accustomed to prairie life, or learned the craft of the border girl, though under the teachings of her parent, who had been two years in his ranch before sending for his daughter, she was rapidly becoming proficient in the use of firearms, and was already a superb horsewoman.

Yet, after an all day's travel upon the prairies, looking in vain for the white walls of the ranch, her horse was utterly worn out, and her little revolver, in the belt around her waist, she knew would be but poor protection against a foe, be it human or wild beast.

And then Edith Balfour sat on her horse, alone in the prairie, watching the sun go down with an expression of awe upon her face.

At last it sunk beyond the horizon, and with its going the prairie insects began their chirping, and the distant, long-drawn howl of a wolf, told her that night, with its solitude and horrors was before her.

Then again from her lips broke the cry:
"Heaven have mercy upon me!"

CHAPTER II. RUN DOWN.

WITH the long-drawn-out howl of the prowling wolf, which showed too well that he was on the scent for food, whether human or brute, he cared not, Bonnyfoot pricked up his ears and raised his tired head in the attitude of listening.

For a moment only the chirping of the prairie insects was heard, and seeing the act of her horse, Edith Balfour said quickly:

"What is it, Bonnyfoot?"

A low neigh, just loud enough to be heard by his mistress was the response.

But it gave the maiden hope, and she said eagerly:

"What! are there friends near, Bonnyfoot?"

Again a low neigh, and a slight tremor of the animal.

"No, no, they are foes, for you seem in dread danger, and your instinct gives you warning," and Edith glanced nervously around her in the gathering gloom, the fading of daylight into moonlight.

And, as she looked, again on her ears broke that dismal howl, and its notes caused her horse to start and tremble violently.

Then, afar off came a faint, answering cry from a companion of the savage brute, that could not be far away, hidden in the prairie grass.

The horse heard this whining answer of the wolf's mate, and at once he was all attention, the fatigue seemed to drop from him, his head was raised, and he breathed hard.

Again came the howl, and then the reply, and another, and then another, until half a dozen yelps were heard off on the plains.

"Oh, Heaven! the pack are collecting, called by the signal of that one brute."

"What shall I do? what shall I do?"

This question Bonnyfoot at once answered, for, with a wild snort he dashed away, nearly unseating the maiden from the saddle, for she had not expected such a movement upon the part of her worn-out horse, which word and whip had not been able to urge along an hour ago.

Away over the prairie he sped, fright adding wings to his flying hoofs.

And, hearing that wild snort of fright, those falling hoof-strokes, the wolf's howl became a yelp of joy, and far and wide came answering yelps, until fully a score of savage beasts were on the trail of poor Bonnyfoot.

Had Edith Balfour only known then what to do, she could have halted her running horse, and ridden calmly back and sent the fierce pack flying from her path.

But once in flight, and not on the chase, they would not be beaten off as long as there was one atom of fear shown on the part of horse or rider.

And on the tired Bonnyfoot flew, straining hard, until it seemed to Edith that nothing could catch him in his mad flight.

Yet whither was he going? Ha! a sudden thought struck her.

She had guided him all day, frequently against his will.

Perhaps she had forced him from home, instead of toward it, as she had hoped and believed.

She would now give him free rein, and perhaps his animal instinct would take him there.

Otherwise she was lost.

She threw the rein upon his neck, and on like the wind he went.

And on, tireless, and as fleet, came the yelping pack at his back.

Nearer they drew, until Edith could see their dark forms not very far behind her.

The sight brought such a gripe of misery upon her heart, that she nearly lost consciousness and fell from her saddle.

But with a mighty effort she controlled herself, and then, as the wolves seemed gaining, laid the lash upon her horse.

Yet nearer they came.

What could it mean?

At last a groan of anguish, as though wrung from mortal, came from her straining horse.

"Good God! Bonnyfoot is failing me again!"

This knowledge again nearly overpowered her, yet once more she rallied.

But she knew that her noble horse must soon succumb.

He could not last much longer, for each bound grew weaker, and each moment his pace became slower.

One longing wild glance she cast around her over the moonlit prairie, and yet saw no object, no being in sight from whence to look for aid.

Then her lips became firm set, her face grew white but resolute, and she muttered:

"I shall end this misery, this suspense and anguish. It must be, so let it be now. Go on, good, noble Bonnyfoot, and perhaps you may escape without me. Oh, God! would that other death than this were before me, and forgive me my act."

She quickly drew Bonnyfoot to a slower pace, gathered her skirts about her, and sprung to the ground, at the same time giving Bonnyfoot a blow that sent him bounding on.

Then she turned and faced her danger, and gazed upon the coming, yelping pack, fierce with the joy of having run down their victim.

She saw them, not fifty paces away, and drawing her revolver she placed it firmly against her temple, the small forefinger upon the trigger.

"God forgive me! but not *that* death, torn by those cruel fangs, no not *that*!" she said.

Then, with a long drawn sigh, she glanced around her, and the flash and crack of a pistol followed.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGER.

So sudden and unexpected was the crack of the pistol that it saved the life of Edith Balfour, whose start raised the muzzle of her own weapon, causing her to fire it just over her head.

But ere she could divine from whence had come the shot, she saw bound past her a tall form, and rapidly and unerringly his revolvers rattled upon the pack of wolves as they dashed up, eager to feast on human food.

But she heard only the first few shots, as the sudden change from despair to hope caused her brain to reel, the blood to rush in torrents to her heart, and down upon the prairie grass she sunk in a swoon.

Thus unconscious, she saw not the tall form boldly meet the danger, and drop with his unerring aim one by one the wolves that came fiercely on to meet death instead of a feast.

At last the pack, meeting a fearless foe instead of a helpless victim, skurried away over the prairie, with yelps of savage hate and disappointment.

Turning, the man went to the prostrate form and bent over her.

"My God! what a beauty! But she may be dead, after all. No, there is no wound upon her pretty head, and it was against her temple the pistol rested. Ah! she has fainted, for her pulse still beats."

He placed her in a more comfortable position, and then gave a low whistle.

Instantly, out of the tall grass, not twenty paces distant, sprung a steed, from where he had been lying prostrate.

Trotting up to his master's side, the faithful animal halted, and from a saddle-pocket the horseman took a flask of liquor.

A few drops poured in between the lips, a chafing of the hands, and Edith Balfour opened her beautiful eyes to behold bending over her one whom to her dying day, she never drove from her memory.

And that beautiful, dark, Gypsy-like face, with its full, red lips, intense eyes, and exquisite complexion, the stranger never forgot through life.

Edith saw a tall form, with slender waist, broad shoulders, and a face that was beardless, youthful, for he seemed scarcely more than twenty-one years of age, and dark blue, fearless eyes, a resolute mouth, and a general contour that made up a very dashing, handsome man.

His face was bronzed, his hair golden, and worn in waving masses upon his shoulders, while his attire was a black velvet jacket, coming to his waist, buckskin leggings, fringed up the outer seams, and stuck in cavalry boots, upon which were massive silver spurs.

Around his waist he wore a red sash, in which were stuck a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, and a large bowie-knife, while his hands were incased in gauntlet gloves, and a black sombrero, worked in silver thread, sheltered his haughty head.

Who could this dandy borderman be that was bending over her, thought Edith, and she glanced toward his dark red bay horse, with his splendid Mexican saddle and bridle, and then back to the rider.

Whoever he was he had saved her life, and shaking off the stupor upon her, Edith sprung to her feet.

Before her lay half a dozen dark objects she knew were wolves, and far off on the prairie was visible Bonnyfoot, returning for protection to the side of the one who had saved his mistress, for the instinct of the animal taught him that there lay safety for him.

"You have rallied quickly, and I am glad you have received no harm."

The stranger spoke in a strangely soft, musical voice for a man, and yet it was not

effeminate, as there was that in its tone that told the maiden it had a volume of reserved power that danger or anger would bring out until it rung in trumpet tones.

And in his face was that look of almost womanly sweetness, yet there were claws 'neath the velvet, should the stranger be aroused, it was evident.

"I owe you my life, sir, and for such a debt thanks are no payment," she said, in a trembling voice, while tears filled her eyes.

"I am happy to have served you, miss. I saw you coming, and not knowing whether you were friend or foe, lay down with my horse to hide in the grass. You have a brave heart to take your life rather than to meet the fate which threatened you."

Edith shuddered, but answered:

"Suicide was preferable to such a death, a thousand times."

"And you are brave to be thus alone on the prairie."

"I am lost, sir. My father is Floyd Balfour, and has a ranch somewhere near here, I believe it is."

"It is thirty miles away, further than your tired horse can travel; so come to yonder timber, and I will build you a wickiup, give you some rations, and carry you home in the morning."

It was all that Edith could do, for she herself, without rest, was not equal to the ride. and half an hour after she was sleeping peacefully on the stranger's blanket, beneath a brush shelter, while he stood guard over her and the horses, and paced to and fro in the moonlight, ever watchful, yet apparently lost in deepest reverie.

CHAPTER IV.

GIVEN FOR GOLD.

PRAIRIE REST RANCH was situated in one of the most fertile tracts of the Lone Star State, and from the day that Floyd Balfour had pitched his tent there he had been steadily growing rich, for his herds of cattle dotted the plains, his horses were counted by hundreds, and a farm of a score of acres was fenced in and producing well.

In a grove of timber, on the banks of a small stream, his cabin home, commodious, comfortable and well-furnished, was built, and about the door were flower-beds, and ornamental trees he had planted with his own hands, to greet his daughter's eyes, when she should come to her far-away frontier abode, fresh from the haunts of civilization.

In caring for her new home, Edith Balfour had not seemed to miss society, and appeared happy.

Her horses were ever ready for a gallop, her rifles and pistols, bow and arrows, and lasso, gave her pleasure in trying to become

a proficient in their use, her flowers it was a delight to attend to, and within doors she had her piano, and guitar, her drawing and her household duties, with books for pastime in rainy weather.

A negro maid and old Aunt Jane, the cook, were the only other females within fifty miles; but there was her father for a companion, and a score of "cowboys," or herders, ever most polite to her, so that she seemed like a queen of a mimic realm.

Reverses had driven Mr. Balfour from his home in the East.

His partner had defrauded him, failure had followed, and Floyd Balfour had been left penniless.

In this strait a friend in need was found.

It was a young man, a boy lover of Edith, who was then at school.

His father had died and left Roy Brandt, at the age of twenty-one, the head of a large firm and master of his own affairs.

He had called upon Mr. Balfour in his trouble, and offered aid, which was refused.

"No, Roy, it is very noble and kind of you; but I have a few hundreds left, and this sum will carry me to Texas, where I intend to settle, and I hope earn a living for myself and child," was the reply of Floyd Balfour.

"To Texas! why the very thing, Mr. Balfour, and you can do me an immense service there."

"Indeed! may I ask how?"

"I intend to start a cattle ranch there."

"You, Roy?"

"Yes."

"Is not this sudden?"

"Oh, no, I have often thought of it," was the ready lie of the noble-hearted young man.

"Well, how can I serve you?"

"I know no more about cattle than I do about China, and I needed some good person to do the work for me."

"What do you wish done, Roy?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Balfour; I've got fifteen thousand dollars I want you to invest in a cattle ranch and stock. You take the money, go to Texas, select a good place, build a fine house—"

"Fine house?"

"Oh, yes, for I intend to live there, if I can, one of these days."

The last was said in a doubtful tone.

"Well?"

"Build a fine shanty of some kind, and you run the place, and we will be partners."

"Partners!"

"Yea."

"You forget I have no money to match yours with."

"You just said you had a few hundreds."

"Yes, about a thousand dollars."

"That is more than enough; put that in, and your time and work, against my money, and we'll be equal partners."

Mr. Balfour saw what the young man meant, and soon found out that argument was useless, so said:

"I would not do it, Roy, unless I had some good security to offer for your money. You forget I have just failed."

"Yes, but not by any fault of yours; no, sir, you must do as I ask, and security you have."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Name it!"

The youth's face flushed, but he said firmly:

"Mr. Balfour, I am just over twenty-one, and your daughter Edith is fifteen; but I have loved her for years, though I know not whether she cares for me, as she is such a sad little coquette. But if you will promise me her hand, as far as you are concerned, as security, we are partners from to-day in a cattle-ranch. What say you?"

"I say, yes, for I know you to be a noble man, Roy Brandt," earnestly said Mr. Balfour.

"Enough then! the bargain is agreed upon, the compact settled, and I draw up the papers at once; but not a word of this now to Edith!"

"No, we will keep the secret from her, at least for the present."

And that day the contract was duly signed by Roy Brandt and Floyd Balfour, and Edith was pledged as security for the money invested by the young merchant.

One week after Floyd Balfour was on his way to Texas, and nearly two years after Edith joined him in his prairie home and found that fortune had dealt most kindly with him.

CHAPTER V.

THE RETURN.

It was to this home in the prairies, that Edith Balfour, and her stranger escort, wended their way, the day following the night that had so nearly proved fatal to the maiden.

Refreshed by her rest, Edith had awakened the next morning, to find the rays of the rising sun penetrating her bower, and the stranger preparing a frugal breakfast from his supply of coffee and crackers, and a juicy piece of venison, for he had shot a deer at dawn.

In the daylight each found proof that their opinions formed the night before were not amiss, for the maiden beheld in her pre-

server a strangely handsome man, and in her he saw a degree of loveliness that had won his warmest admiration.

A good appetite both of them had for the tempting breakfast to hungry folks, and then the stranger raised Edith to her saddle, and sprung lightly upon the back of his own steed.

But Bonnyfoot was lame and looked gaunt, for the work of the day before had utterly broken him down, forcing him beyond his powers of endurance.

The ride therefore to the ranch, the locality of which the stranger seemed to well know, was a long one, though neither of those two found it so, it seemed.

When at last, late in the afternoon they arrived in sight of the ranch, they had become firm friends.

And out toward them came in a gallop two score of men, assembled for a grand hunt for the missing maiden, who was supposed to have been captured by a band of red-skins that had been marauding the ranches of late.

Search had already been made by Floyd Balfour and his herders, until nearly all hope was given up, and then the rancheros and cowboys had assembled for the trail of revenge, for all who knew the maiden loved her, and a bitter vengeance would they have visited upon the Indians they found upon the war-path.

With hats waving, their yells of delight echoing across the prairie, and at full speed, they came toward Edith and her preserver.

But drawing near all reined back to allow the glad father to first greet his child.

And such a meeting pen cannot describe, for he welcomed back one he had given up as dead, perhaps one who had suffered a worse fate.

In a few words Edith told all her story, and every eye fell upon the stranger.

Who was he?

None knew.

No one of that party of horsemen remembered to have ever seen him before.

In a word almost he introduced himself:

"My name is Allan Arleigh, Mr. Balfour. I am from the East, and roving the Texas plains purely for the pleasure of a wild life."

Floyd Balfour warmly greeted the young man, thanked him in trembling tones for the service he had rendered his daughter and himself, and added:

"Now, as a gentleman of leisure, I beg you to become my guest, as long as you care to remain beneath my roof. Come, for I will not have nay as an answer."

Thus invited and urged, Allan Arleigh became the guest of Floyd Balfour.

But better for Edith had she died by her own hand that night on the moonlight prairie,

better for all of them in that lonely ranch, had Allan Arleigh never darkened its door.

But into the nest the serpent entered, and hence my story is told, kind reader.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE.

From the day that Allan Arleigh crossed the threshold of the Prairie Rest Ranch, it was evident that he became more and more interested in Edith Balfour.

And she, poor girl, saved from death by his hand, fascinated in his presence, was drawn to him by a power she could not resist.

Her father watched the two with jealous eye, for he saw the charm that adventure had done, and he could not forget his pledge to Roy Brandt.

True, it was not his fault, yet he felt to blame in the matter.

Of that pledge, of herself as security, Edith knew nothing, and was free to act to suit herself, or love where her heart dictated.

Who Allan Arleigh was, other than that he came from the North, she did not know.

He spoke to her of his mother, his father, and a twin brother.

The former had been long dead, and his father, meeting with misfortune, had gone from his home, none knew where.

His brother Edwin was in the service of his country, while he was a wanderer.

Yes, he had money, had evidently been well educated, and why, without cause, he had sought to roam the wild prairies and mountains of Texas like an Indian, neither Edith or her father could understand.

One day he had gone to the nearest settlement with Mr. Balfour, when one of Edith's admirers, jealous of the service rendered her by an unknown wanderer, saw fit to speak of him slightly.

Floyd Balfour and Allan Arleigh, had entered the saloon together, to take a drink before starting on their long ride back to the ranch, and it was evident that the insulter meant his words to be heard.

The face of Allan Arleigh flushed slightly, but the touch of Floyd Balfour on his arm restrained his movement to advance upon his enemy, and he coolly raised the glass to his lips, when there came a sharp report, and instantly the glass was shivered to atoms in his hand, while the voice of the one who fired the shot was heard crying:

"That is my hint that you had better leave out of Texas, you accursed adventurer!"

Allan Arleigh was as cool as an icicle, wiped the pieces of glass from his face with his silk handkerchief, and turning to his foe said, with a strange smile upon his face:

"I never take hints, Benson Brett, and as I like Texas, I shall not be driven from it by you or any of the gang at your back."

"Won't you? Then you shall stay here forever, as I'll kill you. Stand aside, Mr. Balfour!"

They were the last words he ever uttered, for with the quickness of a flash Allan Arleigh drew a revolver and sent a bullet through his brain.

All was intense excitement, and a "pard" of Benson Brett at once returned the shot, the bullet striking the arm of Allan Arleigh, and the shot knocking the revolver he held from his hand.

But as quickly as before another weapon was drawn with the left hand, leveled and fired, and a second enemy dropped dead in his tracks, while Allan Arleigh, with one arm hanging limp by his side, and the same strange smile upon his unmoved face, said in calm tones:

"Gentlemen, keep the fandango up if so you feel inclined."

But no one seemed so inclined, and Floyd Balfour, who with the others had had no time to interfere, quickly drew Allan Arleigh away.

But at the door he half turned and said pleasantly:

"If those two men were poor, I will bury them at my own expense."

Instantly the rough crowd, recognizing true grit and a generous heart in the man, gave him a cheer, and politely raising his hat he left the saloon with Mr. Balfour, who led him to the surgeon of the Post, for it was an army station, to have his wound dressed.

With a cigar between his lips, Allan Arleigh had the ball extracted without a wince or a groan, and mounting his horse, rode out to Prairie Rest Ranch with his host, where Edith heard the story, which was calculated to make her lover more of a hero than ever in her romantic brain.

And this circumstance Floyd Balfour saw, and he determined to act promptly.

He liked Allan Arleigh, and yet there was something about him which caused him to fear and doubt him; but he had given his pledge to Roy Brandt, and he would keep it, come what might.

With this determination he sat down and wrote to Roy Brandt in Boston, bidding him hasten the visit he proposed to make, and come at once to Texas, as urgent necessity required it.

This letter was sent by a herder to the nearest mail route, and then Floyd Balfour felt that he had done all that he could do for the present.

Thus was the serpent left alone to charm the dove.

CHAPTER VII.

A SPY'S DISCOVERY.

"EDITH, let me speak with you," and Floyd Balfour called his daughter from the Mexican hammock in which she was lying, lazily swung to and fro by Allan Arleigh, who sat in an easy-chair by her side, reading aloud.

"Pardon me, Allan," she said in a low tone, and springing to her feet, joined her father upon the piazza.

At a glance she saw that his face wore a troubled look, and he led the way into his own room.

"Sit down, my child, for I have something important to say to you."

Quietly she seated herself, dreading what was coming, yet hoping that the ice of reserve would be broken, for she wished also to speak to her father upon a matter very near her heart.

"Edith, it is two years and a half since I came to Texas," he began.

"Yes, father, and I believe you have done well," she replied, not hardly knowing what answer to return.

"Excellently well, my child, for I am now worth a cool twenty-five thousand dollars, which I have laid up in bank, subject to your order."

"My order, papa?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes."

"Why to my order?"

"It is to be your dowry, though of course when I die you inherit all I leave."

"Papa, don't speak of dying," she said, with tears in her eyes.

"You are only forty-nine, and will live to see—my grandchildren," she said, with a blush and a laugh.

"I hope so, my child; but here is the bank-book, and it calls for twenty-five thousand dollars, subject to your order."

"The stock and ranch I own, you know, but in partnership with another."

"Roy Brandt?"

"Yes."

"My old beau," she said, laughingly.

"Your lover still."

"What do you mean, papa?" she quickly asked.

"I mean that he loves you."

"No, no, for I have not seen him for three years; I was then but fourteen, and he was not of age."

"It matters not; he loves you."

"How know you this, papa?" asked Edith, thoughtfully.

"From his own lips."

"Why, papa!"

"I tell you the truth, Edith."

"No, no."

"Yes, and he wishes you to become his wife."

"No! no! no!"

"Edith!"

"Papa!"

"Do not act hastily; I tell you that Roy Brandt loves you, asks of me your hand, and will be here to-morrow, for I have sent Pedro to the post with horses for him."

"Father," and the girl's face flushed and paled by turns.

"My child, what ails you?"

"I do not love Roy Brandt."

"Nonsense."

"No, my love is no nonsense, sir."

"You do not know what love is."

"Yes, I do, for I now love with all my heart."

"Oh, God!"

"Father! Father! what is the matter?" and Edith bent over him as he buried his face in his hands.

"Whom do you love?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Allan Arleigh."

"I feared it; fool that I was not to sooner end this matter."

"Father!" and her eyes flashed.

"Edith, the man you loved saved your life; I brought him here to my home, and he has won from me my child."

"Has he done wrong in that, sir?"

"Yes."

"How, pray?"

"He is unworthy of you."

"Father, not one word will I hear against Allan Arleigh," said the maiden with spirit.

"Hold! listen to me. I trusted you and I trusted him; but at last, seeing that you were becoming interested in him, and that he had remained here now for months, I sent a faithful spy, Jack Harding my chief herder to find out all he could regarding Arleigh."

"Well, sir, what says your spy?" she asked, with scorn in her tone.

"You know that Arleigh frequently takes long hunts alone?"

"Yes, father."

"Sometimes he is gone several days?"

"On one occasion, sir, he remained away a week."

"Yes, and said he was hunting in the foothills."

"Of course he told the truth."

"He did not."

"He would be a dangerous man to tell that to, father."

"I believe you; ay, I know that he would, for his hand is ever ready to commit a red deed."

"Father?"

"Edith, you shall hear me.

"Jack Harding trailed him to town, and there he found he was known as the Texan Sport."

"A sport?"

"Yes, Edith, as the most successful gambler in Texas."

"This is an infamous falsehood."

"Then tell me, as he says he had no fortune left him, and certainly does not work, how gets he the money he spends in handsome presents for you?"

"I do not ask Mr. Arleigh regarding his financial resources."

"There is no need for it, for I know; he is a gambler, Edith."

"I do not believe it, father."

"He is worse, for he has taken life in several cases where there was no cause for it."

"With Benson Brett and his comrade for instance?"

"In those cases it was self-defense, but I can give you Jack Harding as proof."

"I like Jack Harding, sir, or did until now; but since he has seen fit to play the spy upon my movements, I hate him."

"You are unreasonable, Edith."

"No, father, I am just, because I will not turn against the man to whom I owe my life to marry some of these wild border rancheros."

"I do not ask that, my child. Roy Brandt is no ranchero. He is handsome, very rich, and an elegant gentleman."

"Granted, but I do not love him."

"You always liked him."

"Like is not love, sir."

"You would grow more and more attached to him."

"I tell you, father, I love this gambler as you call him."

"But, Edith, my dear girl, you are already bound to Roy Brandt."

The maiden sprung to her feet at the words and gazed upon her father with white face and flashing eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET DIVULGED.

FOR full a moment Edith Balfour stood gazing into the face of her parent, and then she said, in a kindly tone:

"My poor papa, have you lost your senses?"

"No, I am sane."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Say it over again, please."

"I repeat it, you are bound to Roy Brandt."

"By what ties pray?"

"My pledged word."

"Your word, father?"

"Yes, Edith, and more—my signature."

"This really grows interesting, father."
"Intensely so to me, my child."

"Roy Brandt has written to you for my hand without consulting me?" she said, with a sneer.

"No, Edith, he has done nothing of the kind."

"Telegraphed for the honor of my hand, then, perhaps?"

"No, Edith, and I pray you drop your scornful tone, and I will tell you all."

"And I will listen with rapt attention, sir."

"You know my failure left me a poor man?"

"Yes, father."

"So poor that all I had left after being sold out was your piano and a few traps that were not taken."

"I remember, father."

"Of your money, which I had laid aside for you as a graduating gift, I had a thousand dollars; but Roy Brandt came to me, offered to indorse my notes for me to resume business again—"

"That was noble of him."

"Indeed it was; but I refused his noble offer and told him I was going to Texas to establish a little home. Instantly he said he wished to start a cattle ranch here, and had fifteen thousand dollars to put in with me. I told him I had no money to invest, other than a thousand dollars, and he replied he would have to pay an agent to start his ranch, so proposed that I put my money with his, and to make it equal, I was to give my full time and attention to the business."

"Well, father?"

"I refused, for I had no security to offer, and he told me that he loved you, and always had done so, yet knew not whether you cared for him or not."

"Ah! he was not then conceited enough to think that I did?"

"No, he only hoped so, and said if I would pledge my consent for him to have your hand it would be security enough."

"Ah!"

"Yes, my child; now you know the secret."

"And you gave this pledge, father?"

"Yes; we drew up a partnership contract, and I signed it, giving my consent to your marriage with Roy Brandt, as security for the fifteen thousand he placed in my hands."

"And this holds good on your part?"

"Yes, Edith."

"You own half of this ranch, and half the cattle and horses upon it?"

"Yes, Edith."

"Then give all to Roy Brandt, and, as it is worth three times his investment he cannot complain."

"But, Edith—"

"Then take the twenty-five thousand dollars in this bank-book reserved for me and start another ranch, father."

"But my contract, Edith, my pledged word?"

"I decline to be an object of barter and sale, sir."

"But Roy will never forgive me."

"I, not you are to blame, sir."

"No, no."

"Then blame the result of circumstances, for had I not met Allan Arleigh, I would have married Roy Brandt doubtless. As it is, knowing that I love another, if I know Roy Brandt rightly, he will release me gladly from the bond you gave to him."

"I dare not ask it."

"I shall."

"But Edith, I forbid you becoming the wife of this gambler."

"Father, my hand goes with my heart; I love Allan Arleigh and I shall marry him, for he has asked me to become his wife."

"Heaven forbid!"

"I take my happiness in my own hand, and I will bear the consequences, father, be they what they may, so let no shadow fall between us, as my only sorrow will be in giving you up."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

But his heart was too full to make reply, and just then through the open window they beheld three horsemen approaching.

"It is Roy Brandt, and the two herders you sent for him and his baggage, father," said Edith, calmly.

"My God! what a presentiment of evil rushes upon me," was the groaning response of the sorrowing ranchero.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RIVALS.

ROY BRANDT, grown more manly, dignified and handsome, in the two years and a half that had passed since he became the head of his late father's firm, found a warm welcome from Edith and her father.

And Allan Arleigh, without the shadow of jealousy, extended to him a cordial greeting to Texas.

As to who he was Allan Arleigh did not know, other than that he was the partner of Mr. Balfour in the ranch; but he could not but admit as he gazed into his frank, noble face, that he would have been a dangerous rival, had Edith seen him a few months back and not remembered him, as she told him, only as a youth.

And this thought the maiden also had; yet she was drawn to Allan Arleigh by a fasci-

nation she could not resist, and no power on earth she was determined should take her from him.

As for Roy Brandt he was very happy, it seemed, enjoying the sumptuous meal set before him, sung duets with Edith, and retired for the night in an apparently happy mood.

But on his heart had fallen a shadow, and with the rising of the sun it deepened into gloom.

The reason of this was, man of the world that he had been, in spite of his youth, he saw that Edith Balfour loved Allan Arleigh.

That it was natural for her to regard highly the man who had saved her life, for Roy Brandt had heard the story of that rescue on the moonlit prairie, he could not gainsay.

But somehow it came to him that it was a species of fascination she felt for the man and not real love, at least not such love as he would have cared for her to feel for him.

Then, at breakfast, he studied the face of Allan Arleigh.

And what he saw there he did not like.

It was certainly handsome, almost womanly in its beauty; but then there were certain lines there that age had not made, yet were certainly the footprints of dissipation.

The eyes, ever restless, he saw were not truthful in their glance, but seemed ever anxious to hide the feelings of the heart and thoughts of the brain.

The form was elegant, and the man graceful; but the strength seemed lion-like, and the grace, the swaying motions of the serpent.

"That is a bold, bad man at heart, whatever may be his actions," said Roy Brandt to himself, when he had finished the study of Allan Arleigh's face and character.

And Edith?

When she had the two men face to face before her, she could not but admit in her heart, that there dwelt that in the eyes of Roy Brandt which she could not find in Allan Arleigh's.

"Yet, with a sigh she held to her purpose, for she was under the charm of the serpent.

The third day after his arrival Mr. Balfour called Roy Brandt into his room and laid before him the full statement of his investment and profits since he had been in Texas.

"I sent you the check from Galveston for your share of twenty-five thousand, which was half the cash received, as you see by my books, Brandt, and my part I placed in bank subject to Edith's order.

"Now the place, that is ranch, cattle and horses, is worth more than fifty thousand, and my share of this I wish to transfer to you."

"Why so, Mr. Balfour?" asked Roy Brandt in surprise.

"I'll tell you," was the answer in an embarrassed way.

"The truth is, Brandt, I made a contract with you that I am not able to keep."

"With your money and my time, with what little I invested, I have done splendidly, but I want you to take all, excepting what I have given Edith."

"I shall do no such thing, Mr. Balfour; and let me tell you now that I understand fully the position in which you are placed.

"I was glad to invest my money here, and you have trebled it, and more; but I never expected to hold you to a contract that would be distasteful to Edith.

"That I love her, I still frankly admit; but I would not marry her for worlds without her love.

"No, Mr. Balfour, I am tired of city life; I love the solitude of the prairies, and here I will remain, and we will work together, for I see plainly we are both to lose Edith Balfour."

"Alas! it is true but, Roy, you are a man above all other men I have met, and God knows I would be happy in seeing Edith your wife."

"It is not so destined, sir," was the sad reply.

"No, for that man has fairly fascinated her."

"If she loves him and he returns that love, so let it be."

"No, for I believe him to be a villain."

Instantly Roy Brandt was upon his feet.

"Ha! say you so?"

"I do."

"My own conclusion, for I am seldom wrong in reading a face."

"I have had proof, for I was warned by Jack Harding, my chief herdsman, against him, and I set him on his trail."

"Jack was gone several weeks, and returning, made a bad report."

"What was it, sir?"

"That the man was known in the border towns as a gambler, *roue* and desperate fellow generally."

"By Heaven! he shall not marry her then."

"They say he is ever successful at cards, has killed a number of men in cold blood, is a fearless prairie-man, and some even hint that he is leader of the Bravos of the Chaparral."

"By Heaven! I will at once—"

"Hold! be not rash, for Harding has gone again to bring me Arleigh's accusers as proofs, that I may face him with them."

"Until then I will give him the benefit of the doubt."

"And I too will go on his trail; in talking with him I have learned where he has been, and there will I go.

"Also, I will telegraph East and find out who and what he was there.

"Have you a good guide I can have to go with me, for I am no prairie-man, you know?"

"Yes, though had you not better wait Jack's return?"

"No, there is no time to wait; I will start this afternoon."

"Well, I hate for you to go, but I suppose it is best, and I will send Lone Star Harry with you, and he is a fine guide, and brave as a lion.

"I will call him."

As Mr. Balfour left the room, he thought he heard a retreating footstep, but paid no attention to it, and soon returned with Lone Star Harry, his second herder, and a dashing young Texan of twenty-five.

A short conversation followed, and it was agreed that Roy Brandt and his guide were to start upon the trail as soon as dinner was over.

Shortly after the meal was announced, and there was a familiar face absent from the table.

"Where is Arleigh, my child?" asked her father.

"He rode away for an afternoon hunt a short while since, father," was the reply of the maiden, and both the gentlemen exchanged looks that showed plainly they saw how seemingly wretched Edith was when away from the man who had caught her in the toils of his fascinations.

CHAPTER X.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

"I CALL a halt!" sung out Lone Star Harry, as he suddenly drew his horse back, and with an impatient exclamation that caused Roy Brandt to also draw rein, and ask:

"Well, guide, what is it?"

"I am a consarned fool."

Not inclined to agree to this, Roy Brandt did not contradict the statement, and Lone Star Harry went on:

"Pard, I have left my ammunition behind."

"Indeed!"

"True as gospil, and I don't do such things nuther; do you see yonder clump of timbers ahead?"

"Yes."

"It's just five mile from here, so you keep right on there, while I go back."

"Mind you, don't leave the timber, for you might get lost, and there's whar I'll look for yer."

"I will wait for you there."

"It will be nigh on to night afore I return, for it's a jump of twenty-five miles to the ranch and back, so you might build a fire, make up a camp, and we'll stay there all night."

"There is some game round, and you might knock over something for supper."

"I'll try, guide, but I am a poor shot, yet, under your teachings hope to become an expert soon."

"Well, do the best you can and I'll not spare spur."

Back on the trail dashed Lone Star Harry at a rapid gallop, and straight to the timber rode Roy Brandt.

Unsuspecting danger, though he knew he was in a land of danger, and with his thoughts bent on his mission he rode into the timber and dismounted.

It was a "prairie island," such as often dot the plains of the far Southwest, and he saw that it would be a pleasant camping-place, so set to work to make an impromptu camp.

"Well, Mr. Brandt, we are well met."

With a slight start Roy Brandt turned to behold before him the elegant form and smiling face of Allan Arleigh.

"I learned from Miss Balfour that you were out hunting, yet did not expect to find you so far from the ranch," said Roy Brandt, striving hard to conceal his antipathy for the man.

"Oh yes, out here in Texas an afternoon gallop of thirty or forty miles is nothing; and I have found my game, too."

"Indeed!"

"Yes indeed," and there was something in the tone of the man that attracted the attention more particularly, of Roy Brandt.

"May I ask what your game is?"

"A man."

"What! have you met red-skins?"

"No."

"Some prowling desperado, perhaps, that I have heard haunt these prairies to rob and murder."

"Yes, one who is prowling now to the towns below to rob me of my character," was the significant and sinister reply.

"Ah! I cannot further misunderstand you, sir," was Brandt's cool reply.

"It would be useless to attempt, it, sir, for I know you."

"Then you know, Allan Arleigh, that I am not one of your stripe."

"That is good indeed; but I heard your conversation with Mr. Balfour in his room."

"And found true the old saying that eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves."

"Yes, and hearing this, I came out on my hunt. I well knew the trail that Lone Star

Harry would bring you; may I ask why he returned?"

"After his ammunition, which he had forgotten."

"It is better so, for I run no risk."

"I confess I do not understand you, sir."

"I will explain.

"You seek to find proofs against me that I am a gambler?"

"And worse!"

"You are complimentary, Mr. Brandt. Well, if you went on your spying trail against my character, you would find that I am just what I am represented to be."

"Ha! you confess it?" said Roy Brandt, quickly.

"Why deny it?"

"You are indeed a brazen-faced villain, and I am glad that we have thus met."

"And so am I.

"It was here that I brought sweet Edith to pass the night, after I rescued her from herself, and her body from being torn by the pack of wolves.

"Over there, see, is her shelter of that night, which I built for her, and here, as rivals for her hand, for I know you love her, and came here hoping to marry her, let us see which one of us shall win the game for life and death."

"How mean you, Allan Arleigh? for I confess I am ignorant of your gambling terms and Texas ways."

"I'll reduce it to such plain words you cannot fail to understand."

"Do so, please."

"Well, you are armed, and I suppose can use a pistol."

"I am not very well accustomed to firearms."

"Then I shall have the advantage, unless accident favors you, as is frequently the case."

"I am a dead shot, Mr. Brandt, and cannot withdraw from my intention because you are ignorant of the use of the weapons you wear, so I demand a meeting with you to settle this little difference between us."

"As you please."

"You certainly have pluck, sir."

"And another quality which you have not."

"Name it, please."

"Honor."

"Bah! what is honor?

"Mine got tarnished long ago, and I am happier since."

"I do not doubt it; but name your terms," was the impatient reply.

"We will take our stands, sir, you at that tree, and I at this, and together march toward each other, firing as we advance, and the survivor wins Edith Balfour."

"I have no claim upon Miss Balfour, sir; but with the hope of saving her from you, a scoundrel, I agreed to your terms and meet you," was Roy Brandt's firm reply.

CHAPTER XI.

DARK DEEDS.

"THERE is your tree, sir," and Allan Arleigh pointed to a large tree some fifty paces away.

"We step out from behind our respective trees at the word, and advance firing, I believe," said Roy Brandt, quietly.

"Yes, sir."

Without hesitation, or dread of his foe Roy Brandt walked away.

With no treachery in his heart he could not believe it would be shown in another, when that other was a dead shot; and he had confessed himself an amateur with weapons.

But as he walked away dark thoughts flashed through the brain of Allan Arleigh.

"That man is not the verdant youth he would pretend he is," he muttered. "He is as cool as I am, has a nerve of iron and I believe he is a dead shot. I cannot afford to take any chances, for I may fall too, so I will rid myself of him."

He quickly raised and leveled his revolver upon the unsuspecting Roy, now some thirty paces distant, and took deliberate aim.

Then his finger touched the trigger, the flash and report followed, and without a word or groan Roy Brandt sunk to the earth.

"A good shot, and that ends it," muttered Allan Arleigh, as he walked forward to where his victim lay.

"A handsome watch and chain, yes, and diamond studs, too, and a costly set of sleeve-buttons; all valuable, and, as I won the game, the stakes are mine."

"Ha! a well-filled pocket-book, too; one, three, seven hundred dollars, and some odd change. Well, I was getting a little short in funds, as I have been losing a great deal of time of late."

"Now to wait for the coming of that Lone Star Harry. No, I believe I will leave this timber and return to the ranch so as not to meet him, and none will suspect me."

He mounted his horse, which awaited him over in the thicker brushwood, and rode away.

But hardly had he gotten a mile from the timber, when he suddenly drew rein.

"Am I a fool?" he muttered.

"Why, that Lone Star Harry could follow my trail and easily prove who killed Roy Brandt."

"No, I'll not be so silly, but wait and end

the days of that cowboy too, and then my tracks will be covered up."

He returned to the timber, glanced casually at the prostrate form of the man he had shot down, and concealing his horse once more, lay down upon the grass to patiently await the coming of his other victim.

How long he waited he knew not, for he went to sleep as peacefully as though his heart held in it no red crime, and was only awakened by the falling of hoofs upon the prairie.

The sun was near its setting, for it was touching the western horizon, and he started at the lateness of the hour while he muttered:

"Well, taking life serves as a narcotic for me; yes, there comes Lone Star Harry.

"Well, I am no assassin, so shall not shoot him down without warning.

"Well, Harry?" he called out.

"Well, pard, I did not expect to see you here!" cried the herder.

"No, but you have ridden hard."

"Yes, had to; but where is Mr. Brandt?"

"Ah yes, he expected to wait for you here, but could not, so I waited to tell you."

"Could not wait; why, where in thunder has he gone?" asked the herder in surprise.

"Where he expects you to follow, Harry," was the cool reply.

Lone Star Harry was quick on the draw, but he had not suspected such base treachery, and he fell from his horse a dead man, his hand upon his pistol which was but half out of the holster.

"You go next," said the merciless man, and he brought down the animal of the fallen herder, and then seeking the spot where Roy Brandt had left his horse tied, deliberately dispatched it also.

"That job is ended; now to return to the side of my fair Edith," he said with a smile, and mounting once more his own steed, he set off in a gallop across the prairie, the gloom gathering around him, and the remembrance of his dark deeds, seeming not to affect his light nature in the least.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATAL STEP.

IMPATIENTLY to and fro Edith Balfour paced the rustic piazza of her cabin home, and glanced continually out over the rolling prairie.

"Will he never come?"

"Has aught befallen him?"

Such were the questions she momentarily asked herself to find no answer.

"Edith, my child, why are you so restless?" asked her father joining her.

"I do not know, papa, other than that I

feel a deep oppression *here*," and she laid her hand upon her heart.

"You have been keeping too close of late, and not taken your usual exercise."

"No, it is not that."

"You are anxious about the return of Allan Arleigh?"

"Yes, papa; he said he would return by dark, and it is now after nine o'clock."

"I fear some accident has befallen him."

"No, no, not the slightest danger; he can take care of himself, and I only wish he could not."

"Father!"

"I cannot help it, Edith, for I have begun to hate that man as well as doubt him—hark!"

"Ah! there he comes, for I know the way he rides."

Mr. Balfour said something that sounded very much like a muttered oath and returned to his room and his accounts, just as a horseman dashed up.

"Well, my sweet Edith, were you anxious about me?" he said, pleasantly.

"Yes, terribly so, Allan; why did you stay so late?"

"Got on a trail I had to run down; but I am hungry as a lost bear."

"You shall have supper, for I told Jane to save it for you; come!"

She led the way to one of the six rooms the cabin had in it, which was the dining-room, and sat at the table while he ate a hearty meal, his handsome face showing no trace of the tragedy that a little over three hours before he had enacted in the timber island.

At last he arose and taking the arm of the maiden led her out upon the piazza.

"Edith, do you know where your friend, Roy Brandt, has gone?" he asked.

"To get a view of the country, he said."

"It is not the reason; he has concocted a plan to ruin me."

"Ruin you, Allan?"

"Yes, Edith."

"How can he?"

"By trickery."

"But he will not stoop to that."

"You do not know him."

"I do know him and feel that Roy Brandt would never do a mean act."

"I am glad he has so fair a defender," was the sneering response of the man.

"He deserves it, Allan."

"Well, I heard him to-day plot with your father against me."

"You heard this?"

"Yes."

"And my father, too?"

"Yes."

"Impossible."

"Very well I have nothing more to say."

"Yes, Allan, don't be angry but tell me all you know," she said, pleadingly.

"Well, it seems your father wishes you to marry this Roy Brandt and they conceived the idea that witnesses could be brought here to swear away my character to you, and he has gone after them to the border towns."

"But I will not believe them"

"They will make you believe them."

"I am not wax, Allan Arleigh, to be molded at will into any shape," said the maiden haughtily.

"You say that you love me."

"I do love you."

"Prove it."

"How can I?"

"Go with me and become my wife; then, after the trouble has blown over, we can return and ask your father's forgiveness."

"Oh, Allan, I dare not."

"As you please. I shall go."

"And whither?"

"To seek this Brandt."

"Why should you seek him?"

"To show him that no man can with impunity meddle in my affairs."

"No, no, you must not do this."

"Then become my wife."

"Oh Allan! what can I do?"

"Do as I ask you, my sweet Edith."

"I dare not."

"Then do not say that you love me."

"But I do love you with all my heart."

"Fly with me then."

"How can I?"

"To-night, when your father has retired, steal from the house and come to the arbor on the river, and I will be there awaiting you with two good horses."

"And where will we go, Allan?"

"Across the Rio Grande into Mexico for the present."

"So far?"

"It is not far."

"But among the Mexicans?"

"They are a warm-hearted people and will welcome you."

"But it will kill my poor father, Allan."

"If you love him better than you do me, remain here and become the wife of Roy Brandt."

"As for myself, I leave here to-night, ere I am tempted to dye my hand with the blood of the man your father would have you marry."

"No, no, Allan, I will go, come what may to me."

He drew her toward him and imprinted a kiss upon her red lips, and releasing herself from his embrace she ran into the house.

An hour after she stole on tip-toe into her father's room, and heard him breathing as though asleep.

Bending over him she kissed him gently, and turning, glided from the room, her heart full of tears and sorrow.

Half an hour after two horses were going at a rapid gallop over the prairie, and upon the back of one was Allan Arleigh, and the other carried Edith Balfour who had taken the fatal step of her life.

CHAPTER XIII.

TOO LATE.

WHEN Floyd Balfour opened his eyes in the early morning it was with a feeling of unrest, and unable to close them in sleep again, he arose, dressed himself, and walked out upon the piazza.

The sun was just rising, and lighted up the prairie, when Floyd Balfour saw a man coming toward the ranch.

He was yet a long way off, but watching him, Mr. Balfour saw that he walked with an uncertain step, as though under the influence of liquor, or great fatigue.

"One of the cowboys," he muttered; "been over toward the Post on a spree."

"But where's his horse?"

"Gambled away, doubtless."

As the man drew nearer, he suddenly staggered badly, threw up his arms, and sunk down in the prairie grass.

Calling to Jane, the cook, to send a servant to him, Mr. Balfour hastened to the spot where the man had fallen, and suddenly sprung forward with a loud cry:

"Great God! it is Roy Brandt."

His loud calls brought a servant and several herders to him, and Floyd Balfour ordered them to raise the limp form in their arms.

"He has been wounded, and I fear fatally; hasten, men, or he will bleed to death."

They bore him into the cabin, his clothing was torn aside, and an old herder, who had once been a village doctor, but emigrated to Texas, hastily and skillfully examined the wound.

"The shot was given from behind, sir, and glanced on this rib, running around it and cutting its way out just here," said the herder.

"Then the wound is not fatal?" eagerly cried Mr. Balfour.

"Not necessarily so, sir; it was well meant, and but for the rib turning it, would have entered the heart."

"The shock was a great one, and the loss of blood has been terrible, but I hope he will rally all right, for he has a strong physique."

"Then dress it at once, Venner, and you, Mattie, tell Miss Edith to send me some linen quick," and he turned to Edith's maid.

"Missy Edie not in her room, sah."

"Where is she?"

"Don't know, sah; the bed hain't been slept in."

Floyd Balfour turned as pale as the wounded man by his side, and tottered rather than walked to his daughter's room.

The bed had not been occupied during the night, and upon the dressing-table was a note, addressed to him in his daughter's well-known hand.

Brushing the tears from his eyes, and holding it up with trembling hands, he read:

"MIDNIGHT.

"FATHER:—As you have entered into a plot with Mr. Roy Brandt to turn me against the man I love, I prove my confidence in him, and my undying affection, by this night leaving your home to become his bride.

"We go far from here, where you cannot find us, until you are willing to forgive this act of mine, and welcome back my husband, and

"Your loving daughter, EDITH."

This was all that was written, and yet it was enough to almost make the reader go mad.

Had it not been for the wounded man lying in the house, demanding his every effort to save him from death, Floyd Balfour would have committed some desperate deed then and there, so heart-broken was he at his daughter's flight.

But, with a mighty effort, he gained his self-control, and went again to the side of Roy Brandt, to find that the old herder, Venner, was skillfully dressing the wounds.

Calling to one of his men who stood near, he ordered him to collect a dozen of his comrades, have them arm themselves thoroughly, mount their best horses, and carry rations with them for several days.

Surprised at the order of the ranchero, the cowboy hastened off to obey, and ere his return, with his comrades at his back, mounted and armed, Roy Brandt had woken to consciousness, and Floyd Balfour was bending over him listening to a tale of horror from his lips.

"I was shocked by the shot, and knocked breathless, but soon recovered consciousness, and dressed my wound as well as I could to stanch the bleeding.

"Then I saw Arleigh returning, and hastily resumed my prostrate position, for I dared not meet him in my weakened state.

"And there I lay, not knowing whether he had gone, or was in the timber, until I heard him call to Lone Star Harry, who also fell under his cruel fire.

"Then he departed, after killing our horses, and, as soon as I heard him ride away, I arose and again dressed my wound, and when it grew dark started for the ranch.

"It was a long, hard trip on foot, and instinct alone told me which way to go, but I was slowly bleeding all the time, until at last I sunk down, unable to make another step."

Such was the story of Roy Brandt, told in a low weak voice, and to it, Floy Balfour listened with a livid, scared face.

"Well, Roy, cheer up, for I shall leave you in charge of Venner here, and he will bring you around in a few weeks."

"And you, Mr. Balfour?"

"Oh! I shall take the trail with my boys there. The dew is still on the grass, and they are all fine trailers. Good-by, Roy, and pray for me to bring back good tidings and my poor child."

"Would to Heaven I could go too."

"No, no, you have seen service enough for the present.

"By the way, Venner, send two of the men to bury poor Lone Star Harry.

"Come, lads, let us be off."

Throwing himself into the saddle, Floyd Balfour set off at a gallop, his herders following, excepting one who had already struck the trail of the fugitives.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FATAL TRAIL.

UPON the crest of a bold hill, many miles from the level prairie, upon which stood the ranch of Floyd Balfour, was a man leaning against a small tree, and gazing intently out over the plain at his feet.

One glance into his face, and the reader recognizes Allan Arleigh.

He looks travel-stained and somewhat weary, but the bold resolution and reckless daring remain, and his eye is full of fire as he gazes out over the prairie at a party of five horsemen approaching.

They are far away, fully a league, yet he recognizes the one on the white horse, for he mutters:

"By Heaven! he has trailed me hard."

Turning he descended to a small vale beyond the crest of the hill where stood two steeds, both with bowed heads as though hard ridden.

At the base of a tree, lying on a blanket, and rolled in a *serape*, lay a slender form.

It was Edith Balfour, and she was asleep.

Her face was flushed, yet haggard, and she slept the sleep of utter prostration.

"Let her sleep until my return," muttered the man, and taking up a rifle from where it leant against a tree, he wended his way at a rapid step down the hillside.

Near its base the path led through a narrow ravine or canyon, and here, hidden by the embankment he took his stand and waited.

Soon after the group of five horsemen came in sight, one a few yards in advance, his eyes following a trail, evidently, and his companions behind.

All wore a haggard look, the horses were gaunt and carried their heads low, and it

was evident they had been pressed very hard.

Nearer and nearer they came to the hills, and then entered the vale, and then the canyon.

Then came the crack of a rifle from over the embankment, and a rider, the one on the white horse dropped from his saddle.

Instantly his startled companions drew rein, when their ears heard the ringing words:

"Men, I camp here, so do not press me if you wish to live."

"Curse you, Allan Arleigh, you have killed Mr. Balfour," shouted one.

"I meant to, and I'll kill you too, if you enter this canyon.

"No more words now, but come on if you like."

They knew him well by this time, and they fell back out of range, carrying the form of Floyd Balfour with them, while Allan Arleigh, seeing that they dared not press him, bounded away unseen by them, and was soon at his temporary camp.

Edith Balfour was on her feet awakened by the shot, though it had been fired a long way off.

"Oh, Allan, what is it?" she cried.

"Nothing, except that I shot a prowling red-skin; but come we must be on our way, sweet Edith, for others may be near to follow us."

He was perfectly cool, and having saddled the horses, raised her to her seat, mounted his own animal, and set off on a trail leading down the other side of the mountain, the maiden little dreaming of the fearful tragedy that had been enacted so near her while she slept.

Pressing on, at the topmost speed of their tired horses, they at length reached the Rio Grande, crossed the stream, and that night arrived in a small Mexican village.

Seeking the padre, Allan Arleigh bade him marry them, which the sight of a liberal fee induced him to do, and that night Edith Balfour dropped her maiden name and became Edith Arleigh, the wife of the man who had taken such deliberate aim, and shot her father from the saddle.

Pressing on the same night, several hours before dawn they rode up to the walls of a hacienda, situated close in under the shadow of a range of mountains, and at a call from Allan Arleigh the gates swung quickly open.

Leaving their horses with servants in the plaza, the two entered the substantial building, the man leading, and, to her surprise, the maiden was ushered into a very luxuriously furnished room.

"Edith, my wife, I have deceived you,

for I am not the homeless wanderer you have believed me.

"This is my hacienda, my ranch, and upon the acres surrounding feed my cattle, while my servants are ever ready to do my slightest bidding."

Poor Edith was astounded, for she had not expected such a glad surprise.

Her husband then was no adventurer, and she would yet have her father visit her and find how cruelly he had misunderstood Allan Arleigh.

With such thoughts as these she sunk to sleep in her new home.

Better had it been for her had she never awakened from that dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XV.

A GAMBLER MEETS HIS MATCH.

IN one of the antiquated towns of Mexico, not many leagues from the Rio Grande, a party of natives were assembled in their favorite drinking saloon, engaged in playing *monte*, drinking *aguardiente*, chatting and plotting deviltry generally.

Presently there strode into the room a man upon whom every eye was turned, and a score of whispers were heard:

"It is the Texan Sport."

He glanced around the saloon, nodded familiarly to several of the better class of rancheros and traders present, and then sat down to a game of cards with several who seemed to have money to lose, as the gambler almost always won.

Hardly had the day begun when in walked a tall, heavily bearded man, dressed in the garb of a sailor, and wearing his hat pulled down over his eyes, as though to shade them from the light.

He took a seat near the door, called for a drink, in a foreign accent, and glanced furtively around the room.

Then one by one others straggled into the place, until the saloon was crowded.

"Who is that man, *senor*?" asked the bearded stranger of a Mexican who sat at the same table with him.

"You mean the handsome, dandified chap, gambling, *senor*?"

"Yes."

"He is called here the Diamond Sport, for you see he wears the gems; he is a gambler, and a hard one to beat, too."

"Has he no other name?"

"Yes, *senor*, several of them, I have heard."

"Some call him by an American name, and that is the country he came from, though he speaks Mexican like a native."

"Ah! he lives here then, *senor*?"

"Cannot tell where he lives, *senor*; you see he is constantly on the move."

"They say he has a hacienda in the mountains, and people talk about his having more herders than are needed for a few cattle, and the gambler and his cowboys all are missing sometimes for weeks, and when they come back they are flush with *pesos*, and I guess they've been raiding beyond the Rio Grande upon the Mexicans."

"This belief regarding him, is what has gotten him the name of the Bravo of the Chaparrals."

Thanking his rather intelligent companion for his kind information regarding the gambler, the stranger said calmly:

"As I see he has won all the money his companions have, I think I will ask him to play a game with me."

"Better not, for it's *pesos* thrown away, senor; he always wins."

"I'll risk it."

Rising, the stranger advanced to where the gambler sat, his now thoroughly interested companion following to see what would occur, and going up to the Sport said quietly:

"Senor, as I'm ashore for a little sport, and ran up here to see the country, suppose you oblige me with a little game."

The gambler glanced searchingly into the face of his companion, but the hat and beard hid every feature except the nose, and answered:

"As you please, senor; you are not a Mexican?"

"No."

"English, perhaps?"

"No, I hail from beyond the Rio Grande."

"Ah! and so did I once; but what brings you up to this part of Mexico, so far from salt water?"

"A shipmate of mine fell in love with a girl who lives in these parts, and married her, and I came up to see them; but I go back soon."

"Shall we have the little game?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I warn you not to stake all you have got, for I am Fortune's favorite, and you are in a strange land to go broke in."

"I have flattered myself that I was a favorite of Fortune too: we shall see though, who she loves the most."

The game at once began, and the bearded stranger won.

Again they played, and again the stranger won.

The gambler looked puzzled, for it was evident he was nonplussed by his loss, while the crowd, gathered around, could not understand it.

"Fortune favors me, it seems," said the stranger, quietly.

"Perhaps you do not play fair," was the insulting remark, and the crowd swayed back, as though expecting trouble, all seeming to know the gambler well.

"I guess I do, gambler," was the smiling reply.

"Well, sir, we will try again."

"I'm willing, gambler," was the calm response.

Once more the gambler dealt the cards, and once more the game was played and won by the stranger.

"There is some cheat in your playing, sir," said the gambler.

"No, the only reason you don't win is because I watch you so closely you cannot cheat."

"Senor, do you mean to insult me?" and the gambler's face looked threatening.

"Don't let us quarrel, but play; try another game," was the cool retort.

The gambler simply nodded his head, the game was played, and once more he lost.

"I guess you are overmatched this time, Allan Arleigh!"

With the words there was a revolver-muzzle thrust full in the face of the gambler.

He saw he was caught, yet not a muscle of his face moved, as he smilingly replied:

"You seem to know me, senor."

"Oh, yes."

"You have the advantage."

"And intend to hold it."

"Oh! I mean in knowing me."

"I think not, for you know me, too, only you don't expect the grave to give up its dead, and thus far you do not suspect me."

"One of my victims?" sneered the gambler.

"An intended one."

"Ha! I should know that voice."

"You shall know who I am, sir; but if you move you die. I have here with me in this room a number of good Americans in disguise, and as many more Mexicans to aid them, and I have come here, with papers made out on both sides of the Rio Grande to effect your capture."

The gambler slightly paled at these words; but the smile never left his face as he asked:

"Well, who the devil are you?"

The stranger, still keeping the muzzle of his revolver in the face of the gambler, and unheeding the movements and cries of the swaying, excited crowd, slowly raised his hand to his head and face, and then removed quickly his hat, beard and wig.

"Good God! Roy Brandt!"

"That is my name. Allan Arleigh," and the young man gazed into the face of the gambler with a look of triumph he could not conceal, for he saw that the man grew livid and trembled visibly before him.

"Now, Allan Arleigh, you are my prisoner."

"Show yourselves, men!"

The order in ringing tones caused fully two score men to press forward, half of them Mexicans, half Americans, and at their head was a young officer of the army of Mexico, for his command was composed of soldiers.

"Senor Diaz, we have the lion now, so let us go to his den," said Roy Brandt, to the officer.

"As you please, Senor Brandt. I have this place under guard, so no one can escape, and we will carry the chief with us," answered the Mexican.

At once was Allan Arleigh placed in double irons, led from the saloon, and, with the others, mounted in haste, setting off at a rapid gallop, and leaving the remaining occupants of the drinking-shop lost in utter amazement at what had occurred.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BITTER BLOW.

IN the strong old hacienda in the mountains, in her comfortable room, sat Edith Arleigh, the wife of the master of the house.

Her face was paler than when she was taken there five months before, and it was evident that she had been a sufferer, for there was no look of joy upon her face.

Around her was every evidence of comfort, nay, almost luxury, and with one she loved, she should have been happy there, it seemed.

But strange doubts of that one had come creeping into her heart.

She wondered why he had so many herdsmen constantly about the hacienda.

She wondered why there were so few cattle for them to look after.

Then again the place seemed as strong as a fortress.

Again, at night she heard wild carousals in the wing where the men lived.

Her husband seemed to be held in perfect terror by all at the hacienda.

Often he was absent for days from his home.

Sometimes he would return with vast sums of money.

Again, he never rode away without a bodyguard.

He had told her that he had sent her pleading letters to her father, to come and visit her, and see how happy she was in her new home.

But no reply came, and no father came.

Several times she had heard from the chattering servants that her husband had deliberately shot down some one of the herdsmen for some trifling act.

What did it all mean?

Such were the thoughts that crowded through the brain of poor Edith, and sent the sharp blade of sorrow to her heart.

"A messenger to see the senora!" said a peon woman entering.

"What, a messenger from my husband?"

"Has aught befallen him of harm?" she asked, quickly rising.

"I know not, senora; shall I send the man to you?"

"Yes, Lita, send him at once."

Into the room soon after came a tall man, clad in buckskin, and with long hair and beard.

There was that about him which told Edith that he was no ordinary man, and she said politely:

"Well, senor, you bear a message for me?"

"I have news for you, senora."

"My husband?" she eagerly asked.

"Is well, senora."

Edith gave a sigh of relief, and the man, advancing closer to her said:

"Senora, what I have to tell you will not be pleasant for you to hear."

"Do you come from my father?"

"No, senora: but I beg to ask you if you heard not, before your flight with Allan Arleigh that he was a gambler, and all that was bad?"

"What right have you to seek me here, senor, and thus speak of my husband?" she said haughtily.

"I do so for your good, as the rumors regarding your husband are true, and because I would not see you suffer with him."

"In Heaven's name what do you mean?" and Edith sunk in her chair.

"Will you hear me, senora?"

"Yes, for your words and manner prove to me you have not come here to play an idle part."

"I have come here to serve you, to save you, senora. Allan Arleigh has deceived you from the first. He fled from his boyhood home on account of wild deeds done then, and has gone down the ladder of crime ever since. This home he lives in he gained by marriage and murder. From this ranch he began his operations upon American soil, crossing the Rio Grande and raiding upon the homes of his own countrymen, his band becoming known as the Bravos of the Chaparral."

"No, no, no! he cannot be the chief of that band of cut-throats," cried Edith, who had been spellbound at the words of her visitor, not being able to deny the fearful charges made against the man she called husband.

"Allan Arleigh, senora, has been the secret leader of that band."

"I cannot believe it, and I will hear no more against him."

"Who are you that dares come here to my house to so accuse my husband?" and she arose angrily to her feet.

"One who has come to save you."

"I care not for such safety as you can give."

"Edith Balfour hear me."

"Edith Balfour! you know me by my maiden name?"

"I do."

"It matters not; I will believe not one word against my husband, and I bid you leave, or I shall—"

"Hold!"

She halted at the command, for she had started toward the door to call a servant.

"Well, sir?"

"Now will you believe me?"

The beard and wig were removed, and Roy Brandt stood revealed.

"You here, Roy Brandt?" she cried hoarsely.

"Yes, to save you, Edith, for Allan Arleigh is all that I say he is, and *more*."

She sunk down in her chair once more and buried her face in her hands, a picture of perfect woe.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MASK TORN OFF.

"EDITH, I meant not to make myself known to you until another time, when you were far from here on your way home; but you forced me to do so, and now you must hear the bitter story I have to tell—"

"My father! what of him?" she cried eagerly.

"Be patient, and you shall hear all."

"I have told you what your husband is, and I now tell you that, in my disguise, I visited the Mexican Government, gave them proofs of what he was, and, to aid my men, twenty American herders, and myself, had a lieutenant and a score of men detailed to accompany me."

"I arrested last night, in the town five leagues from here, Allan Arleigh—"

"Arrested?" she gasped.

"Yes, and he is now in irons, and with my command, which is encamped but half a league from here, intending to come on soon and capture this hacienda and its band of outlaws, now reveling in the ruined wing as I heard when I crossed the court."

"I came on ahead to warn you, to tell you all, and ask you to ride out of this place with me, and forever, for there will be bloody work here soon."

"I will go; but can I see my husband?"

"I will take you to him, if you wish it, after you have heard all."

"Oh, God! is there more to tell?"

"Yes."

"I will listen."

"Be brave, be strong, for I have that to tell you that will pierce your heart—"

"My husband lives, you say?" she said, eagerly.

"Yes, but it were better for him were he already dead."

"Edith, to save you from him, I went, with your father's consent, to trail him through the past, and learn all I could, with proofs against him."

"I was accompanied by poor Lone Star Harry, and in the timber where you passed the night, after your rescue from the wolves, a tragedy, a double tragedy, was enacted."

In his calm, quiet way, he went on to tell the story of his meeting with Allan Arleigh, the intended duel, the treacherous shot in the back, and the death of Lone Star Harry.

White as a corpse, still as a statue of marble, Edith listened, and at last he told her of her father starting forth upon the trail of the assassin.

"And from that trail, Edith, he never returned."

She did not start at his words, did not speak, and he continued:

"He followed you, pressing his horses hard, to where your husband and yourself had encamped in the hills, and then he met his doom by a shot from the rifle of Allan Arleigh."

"In that lonely canyon he found burial, and when his herders returned and told all, I, having recovered from my wound, swore to track Allan Arleigh to his doom."

"Edith, you know all that I can tell you, other than that I wish you to return to Prairie Rest Ranch, and there make your home."

She uttered no word, her face was livid, and her speechless, silent grief was fearful for him to look upon.

At first he feared that the shock had driven her reason away, and to rouse her, he said:

"Come, Edith, you must leave here."

"Yes, I will go with you."

Turning, she called her maid, ordered her in a calm tone to have her horse saddled, and to collect a few things she needed.

Roy Brandt, who had removed his disguise stood by in silent wonder, and when she was ready, led her to the court, placed her on her horse, and the two rode away.

Arriving near the hidden camp of his men Roy Brandt asked:

"Will you care to see your—"

"No!"

"Let me remain in your camp until the attack is over."

"Then take me back to my home."

It was all she said, and Roy Brandt car-

ried her to the secluded thicket, left her in charge of one of the herders whom she knew, and seeking the Mexican lieutenant, bade him follow to the attack.

Within a clump of bushes near the hacienda the men halted, while Roy Brandt rode ahead and again sought admittance, telling the gatekeeper that the senora had forgotten something.

Recognizing him as the one with whom the senora had ridden forth, the guard opened the gate, to fall dead in his tracks, shot down by Roy Brandt.

Then, with wild yells, the assailants came swiftly on, dashed into the court, and the fight became hot and fierce, for the Bravos of the Chaparral rallied after the first surprise.

But amazed, alarmed, and overpowered, they were soon shot down or captured, and the place was given up to the victors to be sacked for booty.

But, thanking the Mexican officer for his aid, and leaving him in charge, Roy Brandt returned to the camp, and orders were given to begin the march homeward.

Without a word, Edith allowed herself to be raised to her saddle, and all of the Texans having returned, excepting those who had been slain, and to whom their comrades had given decent burial, the word was given to march.

Then Edith spoke, asking in a low tone:

"Where is he?"

"You mean Allan Arleigh?"

"Yes."

"I left him in the charge of the Mexican officer."

"What will be his fate?"

"Death."

"He deserves it."

Then on they rode, Edith remaining as speechless as a Sphinx on the march, until they reached the hills where Allan Arleigh and herself had encamped, and where her father had met his death.

The party halted here for the noonday rest and meal, and Edith said to Roy Brandt:

"Remain here all night, please, Mr. Brandt?"

"If you desire it."

"I do desire it; I wish to see my father's grave."

"I will lead you there."

"No, I wish to go alone; I can find it, for I remember the canyon."

Toward evening she came out of the little bower the kind herders had erected for her, and was wending her way down toward the canyon, when there was heard the sound of hoof-falls, and up dashed five horsemen a moment after.

Their trappings and uniforms were Mexi-

can, and at their head was the young officer who had led in the expedition with Roy Brandt.

"Well, Lieutenant Diaz, this is an unexpected pleasure," said Roy Brandt advancing toward him as he dismounted.

"I regret, Senor Brandt, to say that my coming is no pleasure to me, for I have to report the escape of the chief of the Bravos."

"Allan Arleigh escaped?" cried Roy Brandt in alarm.

"It is too true, senor; he had plenty of gold with him, bribed the two soldiers who guarded him, and with them fled to the mountains, while I hastened on after you to give you the tidings."

Something very like an oath came from the lips of Roy Brandt, while Edith suddenly glided forward and asked:

"Is this true, senor?"

"Yes, senora."

"Then shall I have my revenge," and her burning eyes showed that she was in deadly earnest

CHAPTER XVIII.

EDITH'S OATH.

AFTER her implied threat of revenge, and which was said in a manner that impressed all who heard it, Edith turned away and walked calmly down toward the canyon.

The eyes of Roy Brandt followed her until she disappeared from sight, and then he hastily excused himself to the Mexican officer, who was to remain at the camp until the morrow, and by a nearer cut down the mountain-side, he sought the vicinity of the grave.

A small thicket afforded him shelter, and here he concealed himself and waited for the coming of Edith.

In thus playing the spy upon her actions he had a deep motive, which was to prevent her from harming herself.

She had been so statue-like, so calm through all, that he feared she had made up her mind to take her own life and thus end her misery.

Her face, also, had changed from its pallor to a flushed look, which indicated fever, and in touching her hands he had found them very hot.

Presently she appeared and walking calmly up to the grave knelt down by its side.

At the head, Roy Brandt had, when on his way to Mexico, placed there a board with the name and date of death of the ranchero, and which rude monument to the dead he had had made at the ranch before leaving.

Upon this the eyes of Edith were turned, and she read aloud:

"IN MEMORY
OF
FLOYD BALFOUR,

who fell on this spot by the hand of an assassin whom he deemed his friend.

"Born in Boston, Mass., Dec. 25th, 18—

"Killed on the Texas border, Nov. 10th, 18—."

For a moment after reading the inscription Edith remained silent.

But no tear came to her eye, no word of regret, or of sorrow.

But at last she broke forth in ringing tones:

"Allan Arleigh, you saved me from death and I loved you.

"I gave you my heart, believing you a noble man.

"I have found you to be the vilest of the vile, a serpent, ay, all that is bad.

"I know you as you are, and know that your hand took my father's life, because he knew you as you are, and sought to rescue me from your power.

"Thus knowing you, I swear you shall not escape my vengeance.

"You are free once more, and I glory that it is so, for I will have now the chance to strike back.

"Ay, Allan Arleigh, I here, above the grave of my murdered father, swear to track you to the bitter end and yet see you die.

"God in Heaven, register my sacred oath in the Book of Doom."

Roy Brandt could hear every word, and it made him tremble with awe.

But, as she uttered the last word a wild shriek broke from her lips, and she fell forward across the grave.

When he reached her she was unconscious and, raising her in his strong arms, he bore her back to camp and summoned Venner, the old "Doctor Herder," as his comrades called him, and who proved one of the party.

"She is delirious and has brain fever, Mr. Brandt," said Venner quickly.

"Then we dare not leave her; write out prescriptions for what medicines you need, and a list of all you want, and I will send men to the nearest Army Post for them," said Roy Brandt.

The list was soon ready, and at full speed three men started for the Army Post, distant fifty miles.

Then Roy Brandt set to work and rapidly the men erected a small cabin, and then threw up works to defend themselves against any roving bands of Indians that might come upon them.

Within twelve hours the men returned from the Post with all that was ordered, and more too, for upon a pack-horse was an army cot, and many other articles to make the invalid comfortable.

And then, in the solitude of the mountains the little band of a score of brave men remained for long weeks, awaiting the crisis to pass, which would tell them that Edith was to live or die.

And tenderly, through all, she was nursed by Venner, the herder, and Roy Brandt, whose haggard faces and sunken eyes told how severe had been their vigils.

At last the crisis came, and passed, and Edith opened her eyes in full consciousness.

Her fever went from her, and she knew who they were that bent over her cot, and said:

"I have been very sick?"

"Yes."

"How thin I am!"

"Yes."

"How long have I been ill?"

"Five weeks."

She started, and said:

"So long?"

"Yes, Edith; but you will recover now, so you must not worry or talk," said Roy Brandt.

"I will be good, for I have an oath to fulfill."

"Sh—Edith."

"Who have been my nurses?"

"Dr. Venner here and myself."

"Thank you: I will get well."

Presently she again asked.

"Where am I?"

"In the mountains."

"Ah, yes; I remember nothing after falling upon my father's grave; are we near that?"

"Yes."

She said no more and from that day rapidly improved.

But it was two weeks before the start homeward could be made, and then only a few miles a day could be left behind them.

But steadily she improved, and from traveling on her cot, swung on poles borne on the shoulders of four of the faithful herders, she asked to ride, and after that day said she was no longer an invalid.

Having learned from Roy Brandt of the severe fight they had had with a band of Indians who had attacked them, and of the camp-life they led, she did not again refer to the past, and each day became more cheerful.

At last the ranch appeared in sight, and once more Edith found herself in the prairie home she had learned to love so well.

The following day after her arrival Roy Brandt took his departure, saying that pressing business called him back to Boston.

But three months after he was called back to Prairie Rest Ranch, by a letter from Jack Harding, who was the superintendent, who

told him that Edith had mysteriously disappeared.

She had gone by night, taken her horse, her bank-book, and some articles of clothing, and they had trailed her to the town.

There she had sold her horse, and taken the stage to the nearest railroad station, and there they had lost all trace of her.

Then, before Roy Brandt came the remembrance of the oath she had made at her father's grave, and he felt assured that she had gone forth on the trail of its fulfillment, and he muttered:

"Allan Arleigh, wherever you are that woman will find you, and your doom is sealed."

CHAPTER XIX.

GATHERED THREADS.

IN his drifting about the West, after his escape from the Mexican soldiers, I can only follow Allan Arleigh, the chief of the Bravos of the Chaparrals, and the daring gambler, where it is necessary to do so in collecting together the threads of my story, and weaving them with the romance known as "Bison Bill, the Prince of the Red Riders of the Overland."

From Mexico into New Mexico, from Santa Fe to Kansas, went Allan Arleigh, there gaining a name as the Dead Shot Sport, from the numerous encounters he became engaged in, and his ready hand with the revolver, and deadly aim when his finger touched the trigger.

But his restless nature tired of the increasing civilization of Kansas, and next he appeared in Beehive City, a mining-town in the Laramie Mountains.

Here he put up at the Beehive Palace, the best hotel, paid out his money liberally, and had not been a sojourner long in his new home before circumstances of a deadly nature in which he was concerned, gained for him the sobriquet of "Grit the Gambler."

And, while at Beehive City, learning of the rewards offered for the curse of the Overland, a noted band of road agents, who had become known as the Red Riders, he sought to pocket the handsome sum to be paid for their capture or death, and set out on their trail to discover, after he had shot down their chief, that he was *his own father*, who, like his son, had gone to the bad.

Succeeding his father as a Red Rider, and chief, he soon came to grief, for his pretended comrades, which were nothing but stuffed figures, mounted on trained horses, were run over one day by Buffalo Bill, then known as Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins, and the secret discovered, while Allan Arleigh, and his only companion, Stinging Snake, a Ute chief, were forced to fly for their lives.

But ere he fled Allan Arleigh had recognized one who he knew could only have come there on his trail, and of her he stood in mortal terror, though he feared no man alive.

That one was a young girl, for so she appeared to be, who had been stopping at the Beehive Palace, none knew why, for some little time.

She was very beautiful, and utterly fearless; a superb horsewoman, a deal shot, drove the six-in-hand stage coach better than most of the Overland drivers, and evidently had some important mission in life to fill.

Out of her own pocket she had offered five thousand dollars reward for the Red Rider chief alive, and a thousand extra for each one of his men dead or alive.

Upon the hotel books she was registered as Edith Ford; but her real name was Edith Ford Balfour, and she was on the trail of Allan Arleigh, and behind that the Red Rider chief was the one she sought.

After the breaking up of the Red Riders' mountain camp, by the party under Buffalo Bill, and of which party Edith Balfour formed one, the beautiful woman seemed almost broken-hearted at the escape of the man she had so untiringly and persistently trailed for two years.

But her brave heart rallied quickly, and bidding farewell to the friends she had made in Beehive City she again started forth upon the trail of Allan Arleigh, for she had not forgotten her oath, made at her father's grave.

Having now, in the foregoing chapter, shown my readers the cause that Edith had to hate and pursue the man who had wrecked her life, I will now beg them to follow my ink-trail, in unraveling the other deeds of Grit the Gambler, and the young woman who trailed him without mercy to the bitter end.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DEATH-STRUGGLE.

"WELL, Snake, that was a narrow escape we made," and Allan Arleigh turned to the Ute chief, who had been his father's aide, and firm friend, and after that father's death by the hand of his renegade son, the stanch ally of that son.

The two were encamped in a wild canyon of the mountains, many leagues from the Red Riders' camp, and they had pressed their horses to their utmost endurance for fifteen long hours.

Then, believing that they were free from pursuit, in fact, having so covered up their trail as to have no fear, they had gone into camp for half a day and a night's rest.

"Ugh!"

Such was the only reply of the Stinging Snake to Allan Arleigh's remark.

"I guess you would have said more than 'ugh' had they caught us, Snake."

"Snake not 'fraid."

"I believe you."

"Snake big chief."

"Correct—chief of the no-warrior tribe."

The Indian did not master the sarcasm, and believing it to be a compliment remained silent.

After awhile Allan Arleigh said:

"I believe, Snake, my august father gave you some papers of value, and a mission to perform?"

"Ugh!"

"Confound you, you cannot understand American English?"

"Yes."

"My father, the chief of the Red Riders, whose noble career I cut short with a bullet, thereby becoming heir to his dummy horse-men and effects, left you some papers to be delivered to some one whom he wished to see that their demand was carried out to the letter?"

Stinging Snake could not master all this, so had the good sense to remain silent.

"I say, Snake, my father gave you some papers which you are to give to a pale-face in the East?"

"Yes."

"Let me see that paper?"

"No."

"The deuce you won't!"

"No."

"But you must."

"No."

"Look here, Indian, I am no man to trifl with."

"Me no Injun make fun of."

"Curse you! I say give me those papers," and the eyes of Allan Arleigh flashed fire.

"No, he ask me give 'em to pale-face in big city; Snake have money, go there and give 'em."

"The deuce you say," was the angry retort of Grit the Gambler.

"Snake talk straight; no like bad pale-face, kill his father."

"That's frank at least; well, you'll like me less before I am done with you," and without an instant's warning, he threw himself upon the Indian, his clutch upon his throat.

Instantly, although taken wholly by surprise, Stinging Snake met his attack half-way, giving one loud battle-cry, a war-whoop, and a fierce struggle began.

Over the velvety grass they rolled, now on their feet, then on their knees, and again rolling over and over in the death-fight.

The Indian was a man of large frame and

very powerful, and had the courage of a lion.

The gambler was as quick as lightning in his movements, possessed great strength, and had the cunning and pluck of a tiger.

Neither spoke, for both realized that there could be but one end to the combat, and that one must die.

Neither would yield, neither halted for rest, but on they struggled and struggled, until it became but a question of who could last the longest.

Had Grit the Gambler known the great power of the Indian he would not have sprung upon him, but coolly shot him down.

But, having made the mistake, he was not one to back down.

The papers he knew the Indian possessed he was determined to have, and, not caring for his red ally longer, and fearful of treachery, for Stinging Snake had never liked him, he was willing to kill him then and there.

At last the red-man's muscle showed signs of weakness under the fearful strain, and instantly realizing it, Grit the Gambler began to press him further.

But still the Indian struggled on, until he was bent backward by his more enduring foe, and thus held until his last atom of strength failed.

Feeling that he must die, the red-skin never wince, but in his panting tones, growing weaker and weaker, began to chant his dying song.

At last the death-song died away, for the savage was utterly prostrated, the gripe that held the knife-hand of the gambler relaxed, and instantly deep into the bronze bosom sunk the keen blade.

Down to the earth dropped the Stinging Snake, and tottering backward a few paces, Grit the Gambler sunk upon the grass utterly prostrated, and the death-struggle was at an end.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT THE WALLET REVEALED.

IT was a long time before Grit the Gambler had rested sufficiently to get to his feet once more.

But at last he shook off the fatigue, took a bath in the limpid stream near by, arranged his toilet most carefully, resorted to a flask of liquor for refreshment, and walked coolly over to the side of the dead Indian, in whose broad breast the knife still remained.

Carefully he searched the body, taking from it a leather wallet of papers, and then into the swift, deep stream the Stinging Snake was thrown, while, with a triumphant smile the gambler opened the wallet.

"Money! Well, that is acceptable always."

"Ah! here is something that interests me deeply," and he read aloud as follows:

\$5,000 REWARD.

"I will pay to the one who captures alive the chief of the road-agent band known as

THE RED RIDERS,

the sum of

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS,

and to whom shall also capture, or kill, any member of his band, the sum of

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS,

for each and every one taken or slain.

"EDITH FORD,

"Beehive Palace,

"Beehive City."

"Ah! this 'Edith Ford' is none other than the woman I hid from the other day in the canyon; *my wife*.

"Yes, Edith Ford Balfour Arleigh; ha! ha! ha! that is good.

"Well, she is really my wife, and she's hot on the trail, and this document, which my late worthy father picked up somewhere, proves that she believed me to be the Red Rider Chief; she wasn't far wrong, egad!

"But I'll dodge her now, and if she does trail me again, I'll end her life, that is all, tho' she is the only woman I ever loved.

"Now to see what else this old wallet contains."

He ran over the papers carefully, finding several things that seemed to interest him, and at last a miniature likeness of his mother.

This he gazed at with a serious look upon his reckless, sad face, and muttered with feeling:

"Peace to your ashes, good mother; had you lived to guide my growing years, I would not be the wild, reckless, guilty being I now am."

With an impatient oath he shook off the sadness that had come upon him, placed the miniature in an inner pocket, and again set to examining the papers.

"Ah! this one is addressed to a lawyer, and the one to whom the wallet was to be delivered.

"I remember Rule Benton; he was an old chum of my father, and is now a lawyer, and in this letter he is urged to hold Burt Bernard up to his pledge, though he is not given the secret of that pledge; oh! the letter says it is inclosed.

"Well, I will hold Burt Bernard up to the pledge.

"Now to find that all important paper—Thank Satan! here it is."

He drew forth the last paper in the wallet, and read aloud once more:

"CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS, September 1, 18—.

"I, Burton Bernard, do hereby pledge myself to give to my daughter Helen my property only on condition that she becomes the wife of *Edwin Arleigh*, the son of Hugh and Helen Arleigh.

"Should she refuse, then not one dollar of my estate shall go to her at my death, but all be willed to a charitable home for old men and women.

"And I also pledge myself the marriage of my daughter and the said *Edwin Arleigh*, shall take place within the term of one year from the above date.

BURT BERNARD'

"A nice legacy this, that is left to my virtuous brother *Edwin*.

"Well we shall see what we shall see.

"Helen Bernard is beautiful, my father said, and her father is rich off the gold he stole from my august parent.

"So far good.

"And *Edwin*, my dear twin brother, one night at the theater, saved this lovely girl from being burned up, when the structure took fire and burned down.

"How very romantic.

"Her father, *Burt Bernard*, and my father, *Hugh Arleigh*, were rivals for the hand and love of her mother, *Helen Tracy*, and the parent of twin brother *Edwin* and myself, in border parlance *got left*.

"But he did not die of a broken heart it seems, as I am living proof to that effect, and he married a noble woman too, God rest my mother's soul.

"And dear *Edwin* and beautiful *Helen* have never met other than on that occasion of the fire; but he saved her father's life from an assassin's knife, I believe, which assassin was the father of my virtuous brother and myself.

"The romance increases, especially when her father had robbed our father of all the gold he had dug out of a California mine, and then, as he believed killed him.

"Well, the ways of Providence are inscrutable, and I must not allow this well-kept secret to escape, for sweet *Helen* sees in dear *Edwin* a handsome young army officer, the son of her father's and mother's old friend; and one who saved her father's life, and who snatched her from the flames of the burning theater.

"And *Edwin* sees in *Helen* a beautiful girl, very rich, and all that, and marriage must follow.

"So be it, for my virtuous twin brother deserves his good fortune, and I am to write and tell him all about it.

"Yes, so I am," and with a mocking laugh, Grit the Gambler put the papers safely in his pocket, looked after the comfort of his own and the Indian's horse, and prepared a frugal supper, after which he rolled himself in his blankets and dropped off to sleep as dreamless as though his heart and hand were not crimson with crimes.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DYING MILLIONAIRE.

In a darkened room of a grand old mansion, some dozen miles from the city of R—, in a Southern State, a man lay dying.

The room was large, luxuriously furnished, the mansion a superb structure, and around it stretched away many thousands of acres, and within there was all that heart could desire; but the Angel of Death had given warning of his coming, and Burt Bernard, the millionaire, was nearing his end.

A man of powerful frame, and once a giant in strength, he now lay as weak as a little child.

"Doctor, how long have I to live?" he asked, faintly.

"The flame is flickering, my dear Bernard, and may go out at any moment," was the reply.

"A presentiment told me, when I mounted that vicious horse, that he would kill me, and I have long felt I would die a violent death; but Doctor Arthur, please have my poor child Helen, come to me."

The physician immediately obeyed the request, and into the room soon after swept Helen Bernard, and creeping softly to her father's bedside, she bent over him with white, sad face.

She was a beautiful girl, in both face and form, and those who knew her well said that her character was even more lovely than her charms of person.

"Father, you sent for me," she said with an effort to be cheerful.

"Yes, Helen, Doctor Arthur says that life's lamp is burning low, and may go out at any moment."

"Oh, father! oh, doctor! is there no hope?"

"None, your father must die," was the firm response.

"You see, Helen, what our friend says, so let us have a talk together while I can.

"You know I am a very rich man?"

A sob was the only reply.

"My riches, Helen, I leave all to you, but upon *one condition*."

No reply from the maiden.

"That condition is that you marry the man of my choice."

"Father!"

"Helen, do you love any man now?"

"Father!"

"I will answer for you; there is one whom you have met once, who saved you that night in the burning theater, and that man you could love."

"Yes, father, but I know not even who he is."

"I do."

"You, father?"

"Yes; he is the man I intend you to marry; his name is Edwin Arleigh, and he is a lieutenant in the United States Army."

"Father, is this true?"

"It is; and more, he is the one who saved my fortune and my life in San Francisco, though I told you not his name before; also, he is the son of one I loved before I met and married your mother; but let that pass, and pledge yourself to marry Edwin Arleigh."

"Father, he may not care for me, and knowing him, I may not love him."

"I must have the pledge, Helen."

"No, no, father!"

"I am dying, Helen."

"Forgive me, my dear father; yes, yes, I pledge you anything, anything," she cried, eagerly.

"Thank God! now I am content."

"Arthur, you are witness to my child's pledge, and you are her guardian, and will see that it is kept to the letter."

"Yes, your daughter shall have a second father in me, Mr. Bernard, for I love her as my own child," said the kind-hearted doctor.

"And Arthur, you will inform Edwin Arleigh of the terms of my will, and that I leave him my beautiful Helen, and to her my entire fortune."

"Yes, Bernard."

"His address take down; it is 'Lieutenant Edwin Arleigh—th Cavalry, Denver, Colorado.'"

"I have it, Bernard."

"And the marriage must take place within seven months from this, for so I am bound by my written pledge."

"Written pledge, father?"

"Sh—! his mind is wandering, Helen," whispered the doctor.

"Within seven months from now, Helen."

"Yes, father."

"And you, Arthur, understand it?"

"Yes."

"If Helen's pledge to me is not kept, my fortune is not hers."

"Yes."

"Once more, my child, you will marry Edwin Arleigh?"

"I swear it, father, if within my power."

"I die content."

They were his last words, for within a few more moments, Burt Bernard, the millionaire, was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MEETING.

"YOUR mistress in, Bolton?" asked Dr. Arthur, several days after Burt Bernard was consigned to his grave in the family burying-ground.

"She am on de place, Massa Doctor, but am not in de house, sah," was the remark of Bolton the family butler.

"Well, I will await her coming in the library," said Doctor Arthur.

"I kin go and fotch her, sah, for I knows whar she am; she am at de grabe of her fader, sah."

"No, she will soon be back— Ah, who is this coming?" and the doctor turned as a carriage drove up the gravel drive.

"It am a vehicle, sah."

"That much I see, Bolton."

The vehicle stopped before the door and a young and handsome officer in uniform sprung out; and bowing politely said:

"May I ask if Mr. Bernard is at home, sir?"

"He is in his last home, sir, for he is dead."

The words of Dr. Arthur caused the young man to start, and he said quickly:

"Mr. Bernard dead?"

"Yes, sir, he was thrown by a vicious horse, and sustained internal injuries that proved fatal."

"I am Dr. Arthur, sir, his executor and the guardian of his daughter; how can I serve you?"

"My name is Edwin Arleigh, sir, and I am just from Colorado, where—"

"Ah! Lieutenant Arleigh, I am very glad to see you, and beg you will come in, sir."

"Almost Mr. Bernard's last words were about you."

"He was kind to remember me, sir; we met in California some time ago, and receiving a letter from him, begging me to come on and visit him, I got leave and here I am; but most deeply do I regret his untimely end."

"You will be welcome, sir, for his daughter will most cheerfully greet one to whom her father owed his life, and, if I mistake not, to whom she owes her own life."

"Indeed, sir, I must deny the latter, though I did have the pleasure of serving Mr. Bernard."

"And Miss Helen Bernard, too, for you once rescued her from a burning theater."

"By Heaven! was that young lady Miss Helen Bernard, the daughter of my California friend?"

"She was, sir; but I forgot my hospitality, in the surprise and pleasure of meeting you."

"Here, Bolton, carry Lieutenant Arleigh's baggage to a spare room, and, lieutenant, as Miss Bernard is keeping house alone, I shall claim you as my guest, for I live but a few miles away."

And into the house the young officer was ushered, and having freshened up his toilet, Dr. Arthur said:

"Now come, lieutenant, and we will seek Helen."

He led the way through the grand old park, and off to a quiet nook in the forest, where were visible a number of ornamental trees, surrounded by a neat white fence.

It was a pretty spot, on the banks of a little stream, whose ripple seemed to utter a constant requiem for the dead.

"Ah! this is the family burying-ground; let us not intrude upon the sacred place while Miss Bernard is here," said the officer.

"Yes, for I wish you to meet her here, as I have a duty to perform."

Thus urged, the young officer followed the doctor, and the next moment they came in sight of the new-made grave.

At its head stood Helen Bernard. She was clad in deep black, and stood with her head bent, gazing upon the mound, and with her hands hanging down and clasped in front of her.

It was a sad, but beautiful picture, and the young officer gazed in rapt admiration upon her.

"Miss Helen!"

She started as her name was called, looked up, and beheld the two gentlemen within a few feet of her.

Her face turned pale, and then flushed crimson when she saw the tall, elegant form clad in uniform.

"Miss Bernard, permit me to present to you Lieutenant Edwin Arleigh, whom I believe you have before met," said the doctor.

Instantly the maiden passed around the grave, and extending her hand, said in earnest, trembling tones:

"Yes, we have met before, Lieutenant Arleigh, and happy am I now in being able to offer you my heartfelt thanks, for to your courage I owe my life."

"I remember that awful night, Miss Bernard, and only to-day heard that you were the fair lady I was so fortunate as to aid."

"I have often thought of you and wondered if we shculd ever meet again."

"A fair beginning this, very," muttered the blunt old doctor; but he said aloud:

"Helen, the lieutenant received a letter from your father, asking him to visit Bernard Hall, and he has come, but now I claim him for my guest, though I dare say, I will see little of him."

Helen flushed at this remark, but said:

"Lieutenant Arleigh will be ever welcome at Bernard Hall."

"Doubtless; now, lieutenant, excuse a blunt question."

"Certainly, sir."

"Are you a married man?"

The lieutenant flushed, yet answered:

"No, I am not so fortunate, doctor."

"Then, Helen, do your duty."

The maiden's face became crimson, and she looked appealingly at the doctor; but he said again:

"Yes, do your duty: it was your father's dying wish, and there is no better place for you to show your willingness to keep your pledges to him, than across his grave."

Thus importuned, Helen, after a choking back of her emotions, said firmly:

"Lieutenant Arleigh, do not consider me unmaidenly, but I made to my father a pledge upon his death-bed."

She paused, and the lieutenant remaining silent, she continued:

"I will do my duty, and keep my pledge; but if aught prevents you from doing as he, my father, wished, say so frankly, and let us bury the matter forever in the grave with him."

"Aught that I can do, Miss Bernard, rest assured I will do with all my heart; command and I obey, if I can serve you."

Helen tried to speak, but words failed her, and she looked appealingly at the doctor, who said in his blunt way:

"I'll talk for you, Helen: you see, Arleigh. Burt Bernard had a most high regard for you: loved you as a son, in fact.

"He knew his daughter owed her life to you and remembered what you did for him.

"He knew, too, you were not rich, and he could not offer you money, for fear you would call him out.

"In dying, he did not wish to cast Helen here upon the world, and so determined to give her to you for a wife.

"If you marry each other, all Burt Bernard's large fortune, and it is a large one, goes to her.

"If you do not make her your wife within seven months, then she does not get a cent, and you lose a lovely girl and vast riches.

"You have seen each other, so what do you say?"

The officer saw that Helen was too deeply moved to speak, and in his soft, pleasant tones he answered:

"I thank you, Doctor Arthur, for your manly explanation, and in response would say that, since the night I bore Miss Bernard from that burning theater, I have loved her, and most gladly now do I ask her to become my wife, if she can see aught in me to love in return."

"Egad! she already loves you, or I have diagnosed her case wrong."

Instantly Helen put out her hand and clasped that of the officer across the grave of her father, while she said in her low, sweet tones:

"I do love you, and I will be your wife."

"Well said for both of you; it's lightning love-making, but I believe Cupid has had you both in hand since that night of the theater fire.

"But I don't complain, for, as an old bachelor, if you hadn't taken Helen, I would have had to marry her myself in self-defense.

"Now come, let us go to the Hall, and we'll dine with you, Helen, and then I'll take Arleigh home with me; but I guess he can find the way back to-morrow."

Thus did those two meet, and plight their love above a grave.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TRAILED WITHOUT MERCY.

Two persons were riding slowly down a mountain trail, the one in advance closely eying the ground.

One was a tall, elegant young man in border garb; but why describe him, for he is known over the land as Buffalo Bill, yet at that time as Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins, as only a short while before he had left Beehive City, where he had distinguished himself as Stage Driver on the Overland.

His companion was a slenderly formed youth, to all appearances; but one who had known Edith Balfour well, would have said it was that beautiful woman in disguise.

After having so daringly dashed through the band of Red Riders, and discovered the secret of the dummy horsemen, Buffalo Bill had been solicited by Edith to aid her in following the trail of Allan Arleigh.

With the skill of the thorough borderman and scout, Buffalo Bill set to work, and soon discovered the track taken by the outlaw and Stinging Snake, and in spite of the cunning efforts of both Grit the Gambler, and the Indian to cover up all traces, he slowly followed on their course.

Arriving in the canyon he halted and sprung to the ground, and nervously did Edith watch him as he moved about.

"Guess we'll camp here, miss, for there's a day's reading in signs," he said presently.

The maiden felt that he had made some important discovery, and springing to the ground at once took the horses and lariated them out.

When she returned she found Buffalo Bill leaning against a tree, and holding something in his hand.

"Well, you have made some discovery, sir?" she inquired.

"Yes, miss; first, here is where they camped; their first real camp after leaving the Overland trail.

"And here is where they had a desperate fight."

"With whom?"

"The Gambler and the Injun had it together; see that little blood-stain on the ground?"

"Well, one died here, and it wasn't the white man."

"Thank God!"

"Here's where the Gambler walked to the bank of the stream and tossed the Injun overboard; see, his tracks sink deep, which showed he was carrying a heavy load."

"There is where their horses stood, and right here was the fire, and just here I picked up this leather pocket-book which Grit didn't intend to lose."

She almost snatched the wallet from the hand of Buffalo Bill, and after a glance at its contents, read aloud all that Gambler Grit had discovered in the wallet.

"Well, I know Lieutenant Edwin Arleigh, and I am sorry he has such a brother," said Buffalo Bill.

Edith was silent a moment, for knowing well Grit the Gambler, she felt that he would play some deep game from knowing the secret he held possession of.

From papers found in the Red Rider's camp, which she and the scout had searched thoroughly, she made the discovery that the real chief had been the father of her wicked husband.

"You know Lieutenant Arleigh?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes, miss."

"Where is he stationed?"

"At Fort Collins, in Colorado."

"Ah! then there we go first."

"You've struck a trail, miss?"

"Yes."

"Will you share the secret?"

"Yes; I wish to save Edwin Arleigh's life."

"What! do you think he would kill his twin-brother?"

"Yes, Allan Arleigh would kill any one who stood between him and his purpose."

"You seem to know what he'll do."

"Yes; he will go East."

"He'd better not; this is the safest country for a man like Grit the Gambler; I hope you are certain about thinking he is really the one you seek, Allan Arleigh."

"I am sure; I have had spies at work, and letters I received traced Allan Arleigh to Beehive City, and I recognized him when I saw him."

"Again, his horse being killed by you, he was certainly the Red Rider on him, and these papers show the rest—how Edwin Arleigh must be warned of his danger."

"But what danger, miss?"

"You see here that Burt Bernard binds

himself to marry his daughter to Edwin Arleigh?"

"Yes, miss."

"Her fortune goes with her hand."

"I see."

"He is the one that she should marry, and not his brother."

"I think I understand you."

"In this wallet is a letter from Hugh Arleigh, the father, to Edwin Arleigh, his son, telling him that he is to marry a young lady he saved from a burning theater, and whom he never met but that once; also that he also saved her father, Burt Bernard, in San Francisco."

"Now these brothers are twins, and Allan Arleigh has told me few could tell him from his brother, and—"

"By the Rockies! he'll skip for the East, and play the lieutenant and marry the girl."

"Just what he will do, Mr. Cody; but before he goes East, if I do not greatly mistake his character, he will visit the fort, where his brother is stationed, in disguise seek him, and take his life, that there may be no one to appear against him."

"You deem him so vile?"

"I know him to be worse, for have I not told you how he has wronged me, and that I am trailing him to his death with no mercy in my heart?"

"I am content to do just as you say, miss; you are the captain, and I follow," replied Buffalo Bill, and the following morning they broke off from the trail they had been following, and branched off for Colorado.

It was a long, hard ride, but Buffalo Bill well knew the trails, and Edith's frame had become so inured to hardships, she felt not fatigue, and in due time Fort Collins was reached.

But there they learned that Lieutenant Edwin Arleigh had been ordered to Fort Laramie, and thither they went, with a wagon train that was going through.

Arriving at Fort Laramie they met, to their joy, Edwin Arleigh, and with the deepest pain he heard all that Edith, the wife of his crime-stained brother, had to tell him.

At first it was hard for him to believe so much of evil against his own kin, his twin brother; but the proofs were forced upon him and he was compelled to admit their truth.

"I remember the lady but too well, for often has her image come before me since that night," he said, but I did not suspect the gentleman I met in San Francisco was her father."

"How strange, how strange is it all, and more so, that I should be selected as her husband."

"There is some mystery in all this, my poor girl."

"And I shall solve the mystery; but will you not go with me to the East, and thwart this devilish plot of Allan Arleigh?" asked Edith.

"Indeed I will; I shall ask for three months' leave at once; and you shall go too, Cody."

"Unfortunately I cannot, as I am engaged as scout for an expedition that starts soon into Utah.

"I only wish I could be in at the hanging—I beg your pardon, lieutenant, but your brother richly deserves hanging for his crimes."

"Indeed he does, and no word or act of mine should save him, would it do so," was the sad reply.

The next day Buffalo Bill started on his way to Cheyenne, where he had been ordered to join his command as scout and guide, and Lieutenant Arleigh and Edith, still in her disguise, left by the Overland stage for the East.

CHAPTER XXV.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

FROM the day that the young officer became the guest of Dr. Arthur, the guardian of Helen Bernard, it was a foregone conclusion in the mind of the physician that Burt Bernard had forced upon his daughter a very nice pledge.

"Why, they love each other devotedly already, and, as for waiting seven months, I believe they will be married before one shall pass, for the lieutenant seems awful anxious."

Such was the worthy doctor's comment upon the lovers, and he was so far right, that ere the lieutenant had been three weeks his guest he said to him one morning:

"Doctor, I have orders to return to my command within ten days, as the Indians are getting troublesome, and Helen says, as she is in deep mourning and will have no wedding preparations, that she is willing to marry me under the circumstances and accompany me."

"It will be a rough life for the child out there, lieutenant, but she knows best."

"As to that, I have promised to immediately send in my resignation, and we will go to Europe for a tour of several years."

And thus it was arranged, to have a quiet marriage in Bernard Hall, the doctor to give the bride away, and no guests to be invited.

And the day of the marriage rolled around, and Dr. Arthur and his guest got into his carriage to drive over to Bernard

Hall, and the vehicle rolled along at a rapid pace until suddenly the driver drew rein.

"What is it, Job?" called out the doctor.

"A obstickel in the way, boss?" was the reply.

But before the doctor could alight, each carriage window had a face in it, and revolvers were thrust into the faces of each occupant, while a stern voice said:

"Grit the Gambler, you are my prisoner."

For the first time in his life Allan Arleigh seemed disconcerted and turned pale in the face of danger.

And no wonder, for he recognized in the man before him Roy Brandt, who had so skillfully captured him in Mexico.

And in the other window he beheld a face the very counterpart of his own.

"Doctor Arthur, no harm is intended to you, sir; our object is only to arrest this villain, my twin brother," said Edwin Arleigh sternly.

"Your twin brother? Egad, you are alike as a pair of pistols, and I am all in a heap with astonishment, my pulse having run up to a hundred; but let me out, gentlemen, and then we'll see who's wrong and who's right, for matters are mixed, decidedly mixed."

The door of the carriage was opened and the doctor sprung out, and Allan Arleigh was sternly ordered to follow.

He obeyed, with the same reckless smile returning to his face; but upon beholding another person present, and that person his wronged wife Edith, he turned livid.

"Doctor Arthur, you see before you, sir, twin brothers, strangely alike in face and form, but thank God, not alike in character. I regret that it is my duty to expose this man, my only brother, for playing a devilish part to deceive you, and the lady he intended this day to wrong by a pretended marriage, for there stands his wife," and Edwin pointed to Edith, who stood by, calm, white-faced, but with a triumphant light in her beautiful eyes.

Then, in a calm tone that often trembled with emotion, Edwin Bernard laid bare the whole life of his guilty brother, from his first crime and flight from home.

In vain did the wicked wretch deny it, and strive to say that he was Edwin, and his brother was Allan Arleigh: the proofs were against him; and Doctor Arthur turned away in horror from him, while Roy Brandt said:

"Allan Arleigh, you owe all this to your wife, and she will be avenged when she sees you hanged."

"She has tracked you day and night, and now has you in her power."

"She telegraphed me that she was on your

trail, and begged me to come on with papers to arrest you, and I have a requisition here for you, and was constituted a special officer to capture you and carry you back to Texas dead or alive.

"Your escapes have been numerous and wonderful, but you shall never be free again."

"Here, sir!"

Quick as a flash the irons were clasped upon him, wrists and ankles, and Grit the Gambler was a prisoner in the power of those from whom he need expect no mercy.

"Lieutenant Arleigh," and Doctor Arthur turned to Edwin Arleigh.

"Well, doctor?"

"I beg of you to come on to Bernard Hall with me and see Helen, and from your lips she can hear all, and how she has been deceived; I think you owe it to her."

"Then I shall go with you, sir," and turning to Edith, he said:

"My sister, farewell, and remember, if I ever visit Texas, I shall look you up, for you have promised me to return to your home there."

"Yes, I shall return to Prairie Rest Ranch and there you will be welcome, for Mr. Brandt wishes me to make it my home," she said, sadly.

"And, Brandt, I owe you more than I can repay in this affair, and I trust we may meet again, for I believe you start at once for Texas?"

"Yes, as soon as I dispose of Allan Arleigh," was the firm reply.

"Allan, my poor, unfortunate brother, good-by forever, and may God have mercy upon your guilty soul, is my parting prayer."

With a groan that showed how deeply he felt, he sprung into the doctor's carriage and was driven rapidly away, while Roy Brandt, with his calm, but livid-faced prisoner, accompanied by Edith, entered a vehicle waiting in the edge of the forest, and drove back to R—, from whence they had come.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

WORDS cannot portray the surprise, pain, and emotion felt by Helen Bernard when she listened to the awful truth, told by one brother about another.

She had gone forward to greet Edwin Arleigh, believing him to be the one whom she was to marry, and Doctor Arthur only had undeceived her in introducing him as the twin brother instead, and left to the young officer the story to tell.

In a calm, unflinching way he had told all, and bitter was the blow; but far bitterer would it have been, had she not beheld before her the man she had first loved, and, in looking into his earnest, honest eyes, saw there what she had never been able to find in his brother's.

Back with the doctor went the young lieutenant, and for days he lingered, and the days went into weeks.

Then, one day, he received a telegram from Texas, and, opening it, he read with white, sad face, its contents.

It was as follows:

"LIEUTENANT EDWIN ARLEIGH, U. S. ARMY,
"Care of Doctor Abram Arthur,
"R—, Va.

"Tried for killing Floyd Balfour and Lone Star Harry, and found guilty of both.

"Was sentenced to be hanged, but made desperate effort to escape, and was shot dead by the keeper. I had him buried to-day. Will write you.

"ROY BRANDT."

"Poor, poor Allan; thus ends your evil life, but better so than on the gallows, though your crimes deserved the worst punishment the law could inflict."

Going to Dr. Arthur, Edwin Arleigh showed the telegram, and riding over to Bernard Hall, he placed it in Helen's hands.

She read it, the tears came into her eyes, but Edwin Arleigh whispered:

"It is better so, Helen."

And one month after there was a quiet wedding in Bernard Hall, and Helen became the wife of the man she had pledged her word to her dying father to marry.

But neither of the two ever knew the fatal secret of the bitter past.

The cares of his estate demanding his whole attention, Lieutenant Arleigh resigned from the army, and the following winter went on a Southern tour, accompanied by his beautiful wife and Doctor Arthur, who had prescribed a change of climate for all three of them.

And their destination was Prairie Rest Ranch, which they had been most cordially invited to visit by Mr. and Mrs. Roy Brandt, who gave them the warmest of welcomes to their Texas home, from which the shadows of the past were slowly passing away, for in the grave with Grit the Gambler she had buried her sorrows and awakened to a new life in the love of her devoted husband, Roy Brandt, the Young Millionaire Cattle King, as he was called in the Lone Star State.

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